

Imagining India as a Spiritual Place: Life-journeys of Western Spiritual Practitioners in Pondicherry

Tuhina Ganguly

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Department of Sociology and Anthropology
School of Language, Social and Political Sciences
University of Canterbury
Christchurch, New Zealand

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For Ma and Baba

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Abstract

This thesis is a critical engagement with the ways in which India continues to be constructed as a spiritual place in global imaginaries and transnational discourses of spirituality. Grounded in ethnographic fieldwork among primarily North American and Western European spiritual practitioners settled in India, specifically Pondicherry, home to Sri Aurobindo *ashram*, this research situates their relocation to India within the historical-political trajectories which have constructed the trope, “spiritual India”.

The expatriate spiritual practitioners’ narratives of relocating to India offer an antimodernist critique of technological and industrial progress in Western society which, they believe, has led to the destruction of nature, culture, and religion. At the same time, they create India as the site of invoking nostalgia for a premodern lost past of ancient spirituality. This thesis argues and demonstrates that their antimodernism as a response of and to the discontents of modernity is in fact thoroughly modern, albeit exemplifying an alternative modernity. This argument is based on the following: *First*, the alternative in the form of supposedly premodern India is in itself a modern creation available in the here-and-now due to colonialism, Orientalism, and Indian nationalism (including teachings of religious leaders or gurus). *Second*, while there is a strong anticonsumerist stance in expatriate spiritual practitioners’ narratives, the romantic turn toward other faiths represents a different kind of consumerism. *Third*, the alternative proposed is not a return to the glorious past, rather, it is a forward looking vision, following the model of biological evolutionism, in which the modern “ethic of authenticity” finds its full fruition by reconnecting the individual to a divinised world of interconnected authentic selves. Drawing on cross-disciplinary perspectives from Sociology, Anthropology, and Religious Studies on issues of transnational movement of people, global political asymmetries, and modernity, this research contributes to the understanding of spatial and identitarian politics in a global world.

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Introduction

Finding the research question

Looking back, my research started one balmy evening in the April of 2011 in Lima, Peru. Soon after finishing my M.Phil. in Sociology from the University of Delhi, India, I had gone to Lima to participate in a two-week workshop titled, *The 20th Century: Revolutions and Nationalism Revisited*, organised by The South-South Exchange Programme for Research on the History of Development (SEPHIS). After a long day at the workshop, when Lima was celebrating a holy day commemorating *San Christobal*, I decided to go to downtown Lima with a Peruvian friend. Walking bare foot on the paved streets, we came across artists sketching vibrant images of Jesus and the Virgin with soft, powdered colours. We stopped to admire one of Mary with demure, downcast eyes and the infant Jesus clinging to her breast. I noticed the artist was wearing sandalwood beads around his neck, often worn by Krishna¹ devotees. Only a few hours earlier I had caught strains of a Krishna *bhajan* (devotional song) wafting from a location I could not identify. Lima, I figured, had a noticeable population of *Hare Krishnas*. The artist looked at me, smiled excitedly, and asked if I am Indian?! “How did he know?” I asked my friend who translated it to the artist in Spanish. The artist replied, because of my eyes. He went on with great enthusiasm that it was his dream to go to India, the birth place of Krishna. He has been a believer of Krishna for many years, he said. I was surprised to learn from him that he was almost 50 years old because to me he looked like he could be in his 30s. He said that was because of fasting, his faith in Krishna, and the power it holds on his soul².

My trip to Peru was the first time I had travelled outside India. Unlike the United States which occupied my growing-up years in Delhi through Hollywood, popular music and fashion, and also unlike England and Europe which were a significant presence in my history textbooks in the sections on colonialism, South America was a relatively unfamiliar place. The only idea I had about Peru was through the iconicity of Machu Picchu. I hardly knew anyone who had travelled to Peru, and apparently in 2011, Peru received only 3,471 Indian tourists (Government of India 2012)³. In a

¹ A popular cowherd deity in Hinduism.

² The description of the Krishna devotee in Peru and parts of this chapter are included in a conference proceeding available online: <http://www.kuis.edu.my/icpr2014/e proceedings/15.%20Tuhina%20Ganguly.pdf>

³ In the same year, the number of Indian outbound tourists travelling to Saudi Arabia was 1501308, to Thailand was 891748, and Singapore received 868991 Indian tourists. (Government of India 2012; [http://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/India%20Tourism%20Statics\(2012\)%20new.pdf](http://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/India%20Tourism%20Statics(2012)%20new.pdf)).

place so far away from India, both spatially and imaginarily, the encounter with Krishna devotionalism had a lasting impact on me. It also made me wonder why India was associated so intimately with spirituality and/or religion. If Peru, to me, was made vaguely accessible through Machu Picchu and the trope of the Inca empire, so it seemed, India continued to be available in a distant continent through Krishna and spirituality.

While the Lima episode was my first encounter with “Indian spirituality”⁴ abroad, it certainly was not my last. In August 2013, I had gone to Germany to visit my then primary supervisor who was also a fellow at the Max Weber Kolleg in Erfurt. During my stay there, I decided to visit a friend in Berlin. Late evening, I and my friend went for a stroll down the restaurant plaza near his house. Suddenly, outside one of the restaurants, foregrounded against the dim red light of the restaurant lamps, a girl called out to him. It turned out they were acquainted, although they had not seen each other in years. She was happily squatting on the floor with a male friend. Post introductions and small talk, the girl told me that she had been to Varanasi in India and she loved it. Only once she came close to feeling unsafe but “nothing happened”. She could not help thinking she must be protected by “guardian angels”. Her companion smiled and nodded in comprehension, and turning to me said that he would love to go to India as well. In fact, believe it or not, just a few days back he had dreamt of India. He saw a river which was the Ganges in Varanasi. A *sadhu* (ascetic) came to him and said something in the dream. How did you know it was Varanasi and the river was the Ganges, I asked him incredulously? I just know, he said smiling.

Today, “spiritual India”⁵ seems to be accessible everywhere in the world, woven around the Peruvian artist’s neck in the form of sandalwood beads and etched on his youthful face; in the form of the young woman in Berlin who had recently returned from Varanasi, that place of supposed spectacular, exotic Indian-ness in its many bathing *ghats* (steps leading down to a river), and *sadhus*

⁴ In talking of “Indian spirituality”, I am referring to a complex system of, mainly, neo-Hindu religious beliefs and practices, formulated through Orientalism, Indian nationalism and the wider discourse of New Age religion. Contemporary guru movements also contribute to the discourse of “Indian spirituality”. Wherever I mention my interlocutors’ turn toward “Indian spirituality”, I mean their turn toward this complex system. For the sake of convenience, I have omitted the use of quotation marks henceforth in the thesis. Chapter 1 discusses the Orientalist and Indian nationalist creation of Indian spirituality within the wider context of New Age religion. Chapter 3 looks at guru movements.

⁵ Throughout this thesis, by “spiritual India” I mean a mythic space of imagined spiritual ancientness superimposed on the geo-political territory of India. The next chapter will trace the historical construction of India as the land of ancient spiritual wisdom. Again, I have omitted quotation marks around “spiritual India” henceforth.

of all kinds⁶; and in the dreams of the German man which evokes the quintessential symbols of India – the Ganges, Varanasi and a *sadhu*. But as an Indian, middle-class, urban woman, who had grown up with the government rhetoric of “India shining”⁷ referring to India’s economic growth, and more visits to shopping malls than to holy rivers, for me the question arises: Why these? Why not the IT firms of Bangalore? Or a plate of chicken *tikka masala* for that matter?

This thesis is a critical engagement with the ways in which India continues to be constructed as a spiritual place in global imaginaries⁸ and transnational discourses of spirituality. The emphasis is on “continues” because several centuries of historical encounters between India, and Europe and the United States, have shaped the ways in which others and Indians themselves view, experience and imagine India as spiritual. In this thesis I will examine the narratives and lives of primarily North American and Western European⁹ spiritual practitioners in India, specifically Pondicherry, situating them against the backdrop of the historico-political trajectories from within which India’s special place in the discourse of spirituality has emerged.

Pondicherry is home to Sri Aurobindo *ashram* (hermitage) founded on the spiritual-philosophical principles of Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950) and his spiritual collaborator, the French woman, Mirra Alfassa (1878-1973) who is simply called “Mother” by her followers. The *ashram* has about 1,500 formal members (Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust 2012) called *Ashramites*, comprising of various nationalities including Indian, French, German, Italian, Australian, North American and

⁶ For studies of both Indian and Western representations of Varanasi, see Desai (2003), and Gaenzsle and Gengnagel (2006).

⁷ “India shining” was the slogan adopted by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2004 general elections indicating optimism around Indian economic growth. The campaign ran into controversies as the media and opposition parties questioned economic and social development across different classes and castes in India. However, for the urban, middle classes, there did seem to be increasing economic opportunities leading to more purchasing power even as the economy was flooded by consumer goods. For reflections of general optimism in India’s tourism campaign, see Geary 2013. For rising consumerism in India reflected in the growing popularity of shopping malls, see Mathur 2010.

⁸ I am influenced here by Charles Taylor’s (2002) work on “social imaginary” which he describes as, “the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms; it is carried in images, stories and legends [...] The social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (106).

⁹ I often use the words “West”, “East”, “non-West”, “Orient”, “Third World” and “First World” in my thesis. These categories are not meant to efface the internal heterogeneities. Instead, these are used as catchall terms with the awareness that they signify political locations with asymmetrical power relations. They should, thus, be placed within quotation marks but for the sake of convenience, I have omitted them when using these terms in the chapters.

British (in no particular order). Of my interlocutors, many are *ashramites* while others are followers of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother but are not *ashramites*. Yet others are neither *ashramites* nor followers of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, but live in Pondicherry for lifestyle reasons and because it is close to gurus and *ashrams* in other cities. Many of them had travelled to India for the first time between the mid-1960s to end of 1970s or beginning of 1980s. Of them, many have been living in Pondicherry since the time of their first arrival. They are, therefore, expatriates in India, having made a life there. Others are frequent returnees, that is, they have been regularly visiting India in general and Pondicherry in particular since their first trip. The Indian tourist visa is granted to foreign nationals for not more than 6 months. Some who were followers of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother chose to spend all of 6 months in Pondicherry. Others would spend at least a couple of months in Pondicherry before travelling to other preferred destinations such as Sri Ramana *ashram* in Thiruvanamallai, a Buddhist retreat called Bodhizendo in Kodaikanal or travel further to northern India to places such as Rishikesh¹⁰ or Varanasi which are popular spiritual spots for Western seekers.

I did meet first time travellers to Pondicherry during fieldwork. But for many of them, Pondicherry was just one stop on their travel itinerary to other *ashrams* in India and they were there only for a couple of days with a busy schedule since they wanted to see and do as much as they could in those few days. This made it difficult to have sustained conversations with them over a longer period of time. The long-term expatriates and frequent returnees, in contrast, were available to meet me a lot more frequently. Besides, many of their stories shared the commonality of being charted against the backdrop of the 1960s' interest in Indian spirituality and the subsequent movement of Indian gurus to the West¹¹. For reasons of both accessibility and thematic coherence, I chose to focus on the long-term dwellers and frequent returnees. Consequently, it is their lives and stories that constitute this thesis.

Despite my early interest in *ashrams* as spiritual spaces and the importance of Sri Aurobindo *ashram* for my project in terms of giving me institutional support - allowing me to live in *ashram*

¹⁰ For Western spiritual tourists to Rishikesh, see Alex Norman (2011). For Western expatriates in Varanasi, see Mari Korpela (2009).

¹¹ I am aware that by the mid-1970s, counter-cultural trends including popularisation of Indian spirituality in the form of yoga and meditation had weakened if not completely died out. However, for those of my interlocutors who were young college-goers at the time, even if they could not travel to India physically until much later (until the decades of the 1980s or onward) the influence of the 1960s decade remained in terms of their experimentation with alternative spiritualities and the accessibility of gurus through several texts and *ashrams* or centres in their countries.

run guest houses during the duration of my fieldwork and letting me interview *ashramites* - this thesis is *not* about the *ashram* as an organisation¹². Nor is it about Integral Yoga¹³ per se, the discipline founded by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, although I do discuss the ways in which several teachings of this corpus are interpreted and applied by those of my interlocutors who are followers of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother¹⁴. Instead, the spiritual space of the *ashram*, the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and their interpretations by my interlocutor-followers are discussed as part of the wider story of my interlocutors' antimodern quest for an authentic life and selfhood.

Arthur Versluis (2006) describes antimodernism as the critique of modernity. He writes, "If the essence of 'modernism' is progress, a belief that technological development means socio-economic improvement, the heart of antimodernism is the realization that 'progress' has an underbelly – that technological-industrial development has destructive consequences in three primary and intertwined areas: nature, culture, and religion" (ibid, 97)¹⁵. As this thesis will show, my interlocutors from the "global North" presented their critique of the West in precisely such terms – the vacuity of their culture and the loss of meaningful religiosity. Most of them experienced their lives and their selves in their countries, prior to travelling to India, as vacuous and purposeless. The grounds on which they critiqued their lives in their countries of birth and upbringing includes the apperceived regulation of people by the impersonal logic of social conformity, which in turn, they felt, prevents the true purpose of their life to be realised. The self was seen by them to be trapped in the meaningless pursuit of individualistic goals of career and family even as it was divorced from a higher source of meaning. At the same time, they rejected the church as just another establishment which simply served to bind them to external formalities. Echoing Weber's (1930) notion of the "iron cage" of modernity, in their retrospective narratives they presented their lives in the West as disenchanted. It is out of this miasma of disenchantment that India and the non-West in general emerged for them as the source of re-enchanting their lives and their selves as meaningful. Their journeys to India were the means of travelling to the space-time of (a historically created) universal spiritual past now seen to be lost in the West. It is the central aim of this thesis to argue and

¹² This was explained to all my *ashramite* interlocutors as well as to members of the *ashram* who are in charge of its administration.

¹³ See Chapter 1 for an explanation of Integral Yoga and its main tenets.

¹⁴ I discuss below the factors which were instrumental in my decision of not making this an ethnography of the *ashram*.

¹⁵ See Chapter 1 for a discussion of antimodernism.

demonstrate that their antimodernism as a response of and to the discontents of modernity is, in fact, thoroughly modern, albeit exemplifying an alternative modernity.

Meandering to Pondicherry

When the research proposal started taking shape in my mind, I wanted to combine my personal interest in travelling, bolstered by my Lima trip, with anthropological and sociological studies of travel and tourism. Several things pointed me specifically to spiritual tourism. The Peruvian artist was one, although whether Krishna devotion is spiritual or religious is something that can be debated, and I will engage with the spirituality versus religion question in the next chapter. Secondly, sometime in 2010, the Hollywood film, *Eat, Pray, Love* based on Elizabeth Gilbert's book of the same name had been released in India. While the section "Eat" was set in Italy depicted as the land of sumptuous food and handsome men with overprotective mothers, "Pray" was ostensibly equated with India which in turn was equated with Gilbert's narrative of self-discovery and inner peace, pursued in an Indian *ashram* (hermitage). Refrains of "connecting with myself", "rediscovering myself", "finding inner joy" are common in tourism discourses (Norman 2011) and also formed the central theme of Gilbert's book. Although ostensibly irreligious, nevertheless, often certain modified religious practices and philosophies, underwrite this discourse – meditating, doing yoga, spending time by oneself in retreats and monasteries as well as *ashrams*.

Several texts, academic and popular, on Western tourists to India also focus on these practices and refer to *ashram*-going, meditation and yoga-doing tourists as spiritual tourists¹⁶ (Norman 2011; Smith, MacLeod and Robertson 2010). Based on my personal and academic interest in travel and tourism, and a preliminary perusal of literature on the kind of tourism that India was popular for, I decided to pursue the topic of Western spiritual tourists to India, by whom I meant short-term (less than 6 months) visitors to Indian *ashrams* and monasteries. However, as discussed earlier, I decided to shift the focus of my study from short-term visitors to long-term expatriates in Pondicherry in order to have sustained interactions with them over a longer period of time.

¹⁶ Norman (2011) defines spiritual tourism as, "tourism characterized by an intentional search for spiritual benefit that coincides with religious practices" (1). He expands on this to describe the spiritual tourist as, "one who includes an activity, such as yoga, meditation, following a pilgrimage, prayer or time for self-reflection in their travel itinerary for the purposes of 'spiritual betterment', such as creating personal meaning, in a secular way" (ibid, 20). In *Key Concepts in Tourist Studies* (Smith, MacLeod and Robertson 2010), spiritual tourism is seen to include, "visiting religious sites or buildings, spiritual landscapes, pilgrimage centres, *ashrams*, retreats or gurus. The spiritual quest is seen as more abstract than a specifically religious one, focusing on the balance of body, mind and spirit." (144). My own understanding of spiritual tourists was based on these and other similar definitions, hence, my interest in *ashrams*.

Nevertheless, I did start out on my project looking for *ashrams* where I could conduct my study. Gilbert's endorsement of *ashrams* as spiritual spaces gave me the idea of looking at *ashrams* for the purposes of my research since it would give me the opportunity, hopefully, to talk to many people at once from a wide range of countries in a single location¹⁷. So, then the question was: where, which *ashram*? Although guru-stories were common in my family – stories of powerful gurus who could predict the future accurately and stories of fake gurus who reduced their disciples to poverty by cheating them of their hard earned money – neither me nor my parents were devotees of any guru. We were not acquainted with any *ashram* either. The range of gurus (alive or otherwise) and *ashrams* to choose from was, therefore, very wide. In the absence of any personal, intimate connections¹⁸, the question of which *ashram* to choose came to revolve around practical issues, the most important being concerns about my safety.

I was born and brought up in Delhi but many years of living there did nothing to make me feel like I belonged there. I loved the mix of Mughal and colonial architecture, the wide roads near India gate contrasted with the claustrophobic by-lanes of Old Delhi, the foggy winter mornings and the April spring sky, and yet, I could not bring myself to love the city. I felt stressed and unhappy and although had a rather laidback life, I constantly felt as if I was being rushed by some unseen spirit of the city. More than anything else, I felt unsafe as a woman in Delhi. Sexual harassment was a commonplace. It was usual to get groped, cat-called, or stared at by men in a vicious, violent gaze. Most of my female friends who had grown up in Delhi loved Delhi and seemed to be less fazed than me by the everyday acts of sexual harassment. But given my impressions and experiences of Delhi, and the daily masculine aggression, for field work at least, I wanted to be as far removed from a similar scenario as possible. The most important question for me, for the purposes of my fieldwork, then, was, “where will I be safe?”¹⁹ In a conversation with my M.Phil supervisor in the Department of Sociology, University of Delhi, I expressed my worries to him. “Why don't you go to

¹⁷ On the popularity of *ashrams* in India among Western spiritual seekers, see Carney (2007); Sharpley and Sundaram (2005); see also Bruner's (1996) auto-ethnographic study of the Himalayan Institute *ashram* in Pennsylvania for an indication of the significance of the *ashram* as a spiritual space.

¹⁸ In contrast, Kirin Narayan's (1989) monograph on the religious stories of Swami Prakashananda Saraswati were based on her long association with him since she was 10 years old (7). Where Narayan knew *whom* to work with, Sondra L. Hausner (2007) knew *where* to start her ethnographic excursion into Hindu ascetic life. As a child, she had lived in Kathmandu, Nepal where a Hindu yogi taught yoga to her mother. Based on her childhood experiences, Hausner (ibid) decides to include Kathmandu as one of her sites of inquiry.

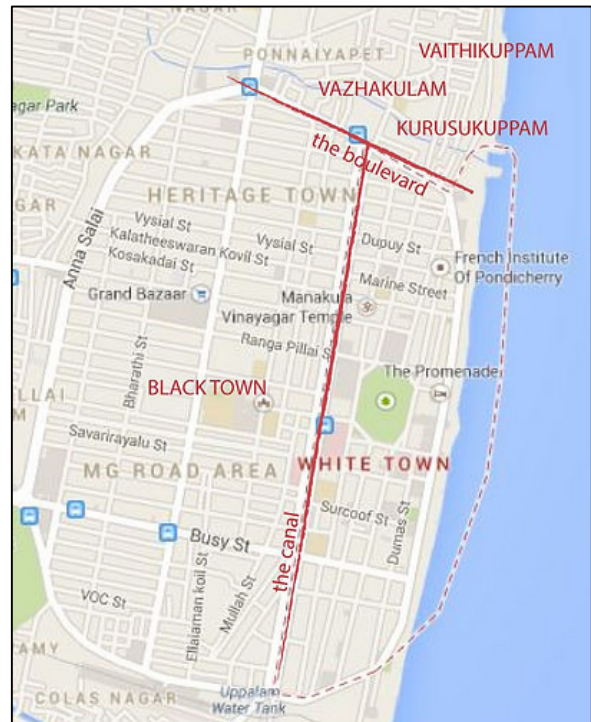
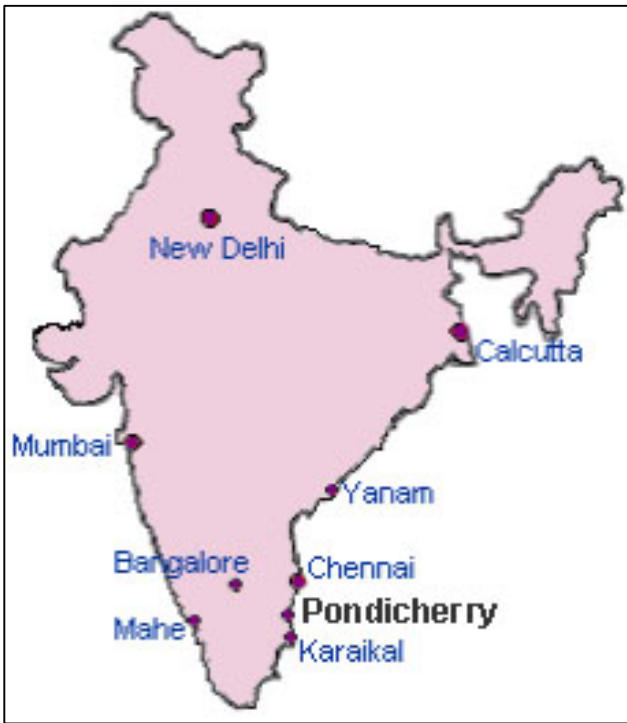
¹⁹ Recalling her field work experiences in Varanasi, Mari Korpela (2009) writes of the difficulties involved for a young, Western woman. She writes that she would get hassled by the local men but Western men too presumed that she was “sexually available” (48). The situation improved for her though when it became known that she was married and her husband was also visiting Varanasi with her.

Pondicherry?”, he asked. He said he had heard it was a relatively relaxed, safe place and there was an *ashram* there, Sri Aurobindo *ashram*. Aurobindo Ghose was Bengali and being Bengali myself, I had vague recollections of hearing about “*r̥ṣi* (sage) Aurobindo” from relatives. But I did not have much idea about him or his school of teachings. However, when friends and family who had visited Pondicherry corroborated my supervisor’s views of the city as a safe enough place for a solo woman traveller, I decided to go there for my doctoral project. That, then, was my introduction to Pondicherry, subsequently my “field”, based on word-of-mouth, my own perceptions, and popular imaginaries.

Pondicherry

Pondicherry, or “Pondy” as it is commonly called by people living there, is an unusual chapter in the annals of Indian history. While most of India’s colonial past is associated with the British, and by far England ruled over most parts of India by mid-19th century, small pockets were still governed by other European nations and gained independence much after the British controlled regions in 1947. Pondicherry was one of these places, ruled as it was by the French until 1954.

What used to be Puducherri, “new town” in Tamil language, was renamed Pondichery in 1674 when Francois Martin, director of the French East India Trading Company, landed there. It was, “a small, Tamil fishing village on the southeastern (Coromandel) coast, facing the Bay of Bengal” (Miles 1995, 2) (Figure 1). But given its strategic location along the coast, Pondicherry was established as the capital of the French trading posts. Over the 18th century, France and Britain fought over the control of Pondicherry as part of their skirmishes in trying to possess as much territory within India as they could. Between 1761 and 1814, Pondicherry changed hands between the British and the French quite a few times. In 1761, the British captured Pondicherry which was however returned to France in 1763 following the Treaty of Paris. The French lost Pondicherry to the British again in 1793, regaining it in 1814 from which time it continued to govern Pondicherry until formal cessation to post-independence India in 1954. In 1962, Pondicherry was declared a Union Territory. Unlike other states which have their own elected governments with the Chief Minister heading it, Union Territories are directly governed by the central or union government. Although, geographically, Pondicherry falls within the state of Tamil Nadu, politically it is separate from the state. In 2006, Pondicherry was rechristened Puducherry by the government to revert to its



Clockwise from top left: Figure 1. Map of India showing Pondicherry (Image courtesy: Flavors India Private Limited²⁰); Figure 2. Spatial segregation into “white town” and “black town” in Pondicherry (Image courtesy: Deepa Reddy²¹); Figure 3. Restored French heritage building on Rue Romain Rolland (Image courtesy: Tuhina Ganguly); Figure 4. Sri Aurobindo *ashram* main building (Image courtesy: Tuhina Ganguly).

²⁰ <http://www.flavorsindia.com/>

²¹ <http://www.paticheri.com/2014/08/20/a-fisherman-story/>

pre-colonial name. However, throughout my thesis I refer to it as Pondicherry since that is how all my interlocutors and friends referred to it. As a result, I too got accustomed to calling it Pondicherry instead of Puducherry.

Vestiges of French colonialism are most evident today in the architecture and streetscape of Pondicherry. The now-dysfunctional Grand Canal divides the city into two sections – the French town, also known earlier as Ville Blanche (white town) and the Indian town, also referred to in the past, rather derogatorily, as Ville Noir (black town) (Figure 2). The French town stretches from the canal to the promenade or Beach Road, the stretch of wide road along the sea front with restaurants and hotels doing brisk business. The streets here bear names typically beginning with “Rue” such as Rue Dumas and Rue Francois Martin, named mostly after French governors in India. Several French buildings deemed heritage buildings, often distinguishable by their bright yellow wall paint, massive wooden doors, high ceilings, and thick pillars stand on these streets, many compound walls resplendent with bright bougainvillea plants.

The streetscape of the French town in Pondicherry can be broadly divided into a colour scheme of two – yellow and grey, the yellow of French buildings (Figure 3) and the grey of Sri Aurobindo *ashram* buildings (Figure 4). Sri Aurobindo *ashram* is a dispersed but ostensible presence in the French town, located both on tourist maps and faith based traveller-devotees’ networks of sacred places. The *ashram* centres on the spiritual-philosophical tenets of Sri Aurobindo Ghose and the Mother. In terms of spatial construction, most *ashrams* are usually gated, enclosed spaces although the total area varies depending on available funds. Sri Aurobindo *ashram* is quite distinctive in this sense in that it has several buildings such as guest houses, the *ashram* school, the printing press, the post office, grocery stores, library and boutiques spread throughout (primarily) the French Town. So, when speaking of the *ashram*, its spatial location goes beyond the confines of any one particular enclosed space. But the spatial kernel of the *ashram* – and it is usually this space that is commonly referred to when people say “the *ashram*” – is the main building (Figure 4) where lies the tomb of Sri Aurobindo and the French Mother. Indo-French ties in Pondicherry, thus, go beyond architecture into the realm of spiritual alliance between Sri Aurobindo and the Mother²².

However, it was precisely the geographically dispersed nature of the *ashram* which made it impossible for me to study the *ashram* as an organisation. Therefore, as mentioned before, this is not an ethnography of the *ashram* per se. Comparing Sri Aurobindo *ashram* to Sri Ramana *ashram* in the nearby town of Thiruvanamallai would help clarify the distinctiveness of Sri Aurobindo

²² See next chapter for their biographies and teachings.

ashram's spatial arrangement. Over the course of fieldwork, I travelled to Sri Ramana *ashram* on two separate occasions with two different interlocutors. Sri Ramana *ashram* is a single, enclosed, gated space, located at the foot of the sacred mountain Arunachala (said to be the abode of the deity, Shiva), with an administrative office, temple, *samadhi* hall (housing Sri Ramana's tomb), meditation hall, dining hall, rooms for temporary visitors, and the *ashramites*' rooms. Thus, as soon as one enters the gates of the *ashram*, there is a sense of having entered the life of the *ashram*. Contrast this with Sri Aurobindo *ashram* where the main building with Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's tomb, despite functioning as the sacred spatial centre of the *ashram*, is only one, albeit extremely significant, part of the *ashram*; the rest of the *ashram* is spread throughout the French part of the town.

Where Sri Ramana *ashram*, in terms of spatiality, is contained within gated boundaries, Sri Aurobindo *ashram* is diffuse and can, in fact, cause confusion to the first time visitor trying to locate the *ashram*. Religious Studies scholar Ann Gleig and co-author Charles I. Flores (2013) describe the "geographical predicament" that might confound those unacquainted with the *ashram* in these words:

First time visitors to the Sri Aurobindo *ashram* in Pondicherry might well have a difficult time locating it. While they would reasonably assume that the ashram of one of the most influential figures of twentieth-century India would be easily found, it is quite possible, particularly if they are visiting in the hot season when temperatures reach 40 degrees Celsius and the numbers of visitors drop, that they could walk straight past the side or back of the unassuming ashram building" (38).

Although I visited the *ashram* for the first time in the much cooler month of October, like any first time visitor, I found it difficult to locate the *ashram* main building, given it is not within a single enclosed space, and it took me a while to understand that the *ashram* occupies, rather unconventionally, multiple locations within the larger French town.

For an anthropologist, as I found during fieldwork, the spatial diffusion of the *ashram* makes it impossible to study the life of the *ashram*. There was no one space from where I could observe and participate in the life of the *ashram*. For instance, had I chosen to position myself at the main building, I would have had no idea what was going on elsewhere in the *ashram*, say, the dining hall, or the guest houses or anywhere else for that matter. Likewise, although I did volunteer at the *ashram* dining hall thinking that would give me a good glimpse of the *ashram* life, being there simultaneously meant that I could not be elsewhere at the same time, giving me an incomplete and

partial picture of the goings-on in the *ashram* (see below for more on the dining hall). Thus, working and volunteering anywhere in the *ashram* does not give one a coherent sense of the *ashram* life.

Further comparison with Sri Ramana *ashram* would be instructive in telling us more about Sri Aurobindo *ashram*. There is a strong insistence on meditation in Sri Ramana *ashram*, in keeping with Sri Ramana's teachings on the experience of non-duality, that is the realisation that one self and everything else is simply a part and manifestation of the universal self called Brahman (Visvanathan 2010). Despite the fact that meditation is essentially a personal, individual practice, it is visibly a part of the collective life of the *ashram*, such visibility aided by the spatial arrangement of the *ashram*. During my two visits to Sri Ramana *ashram*, I observed people, both permanent members of the *ashram* and visitors, going to meditate in the meditation hall throughout the course of the day. People also make their way to the *samadhi* hall and meditate there. It is also common for visitors and *ashramites* to walk up the mountain called *Arunachala* in the early morning hours – it starts getting very hot after about 10 a.m. – and meditate in one of the two caves named *Virupaksha* and *Skanda*, in which Sri Ramana lived and meditated from 1899-1916 and 1915-1922 respectively (ibid). As I found talking to the interlocutors I had travelled with as well as others visiting the *ashram*, both caves are held to be conducive to meditation as devotees feel that they are imbued with Sri Ramana's presence. According to Sri Ramana, meditation was the means of gaining self-realisation, and despite being a contemplative individual practice, it is an essential aspect of the collective life of the *ashram*.

By contrast, Sri Aurobindo believed that the most significant spiritual practice involved, not silent meditation, but active work in this life to achieve realization and higher spiritual consciousness which would be geared toward making this world a better place instead of striving for liberation from the cycle of birth (Heehs 2008). Consequently, there is an emphasis on *karma* yoga, that is, spiritual practice through work. *Ashramites* are meant to work in one or more of the 80 work units, called “departments”, as part of their spiritual practice (*sadhana*). Given the time constraints of field work, I could not possibly have worked in more than a couple of departments had I chosen to focus on the organisational make-up of the *ashram* which, in turn, would only have given me a partial picture. Besides, people had time to socially engage with me only outside of their work schedule.

This became evident during my volunteer work in the *ashram* dining hall. The *ashram* has a common dining hall, established by the Mother in 1934 (Pillai 2005, 281), which provides three

vegetarian meals a day free of cost to all *ashramites*, and at the price of Rupees 20 (about 30 U.S. cents) for visitors staying in the *ashram* guest houses. For the purposes of participant-observation and as a gesture of gratitude to the *ashram* for its support, I volunteered to rinse dishes in the dining hall every afternoon from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. My hopes of being able to strike up conversations with fellow volunteers and *ashramites* were quickly dashed since we hardly got any time to talk for the two hours of lunch time and most workers, I noticed, preferred doing their assigned duty in silence as a mode of meditative contemplation. Further, my requests to some of my interlocutors to accompany them to their departments were also turned down since they did not want to be disturbed while doing their work.

Several of my interlocutors, in their conversations with me, insisted that they did their work in the spirit of yoga and that it was a form of meditation for them. But such actions are only visible to co-workers in respective departments. The collective action-oriented life of the *ashram*, thus, remains in the background and difficult to see for those like me trying to figure out the everyday, humdrum life of the *ashram* organisation. For the most part, then, I had to remain content with *asking* people what their work entailed. Thus, while we *talked* about what they did, I could not observe them *doing* karma yoga as an embodied practice, much as I would have liked to write this thesis in the form of a more traditional ethnography focusing not only on narratives but also embodied practices.

It is also the case that despite some collective activities such as group meditation at the *ashram* main building on specific days and time, and sports activities for all *ashramites*, there is much emphasis on individual spiritual practice. Departmental work is one of the ways in which *ashramites* serve their purpose of contributing to the organisation. But apart from that, there is a lot of freedom in terms of whether or not they want to participate in some of the collective gatherings. Again, this is different to the life of most *ashrams* where there is a fixed schedule which devotees and *ashramites* are meant to participate in such as collective *bhajan* singing in the morning, collective breakfast, meditation, and satsang (religious or spiritual discourse) (Srinivas 2010; Visvanathan 2010). However, there is no such schedule in Sri Aurobindo *ashram*. Although there are fixed meal times at the *ashram* dining hall and also fixed hours every evening for *ashramites* to participate in collective sports activities in the *ashram* playground, nonetheless, *ashramites* can choose not to attend these. Some of my interlocutors chose not to participate in many collective activities, others participated in them sporadically, yet others were regular participants but did not seem keen to have me there with them (and understandably so given they would have been busy for the duration of the activity). Thus, when I was meeting people, it was usually on a one-to-one basis rather than as part of collective settings. For these reasons, placing very real and practical

constraints on what I could and could not study, I decided to focus on individuals and their lives in Pondicherry instead of making this a thesis about the *ashram* as a whole.

Further, over the course of fieldwork, an Indian researcher based at the Institut Français de Pondichéry (French Institute of Pondicherry) introduced me to two European expatriates, neither of them associated with the *ashram*, who had been living in Pondicherry for over two decades. One of them has been working as a freelance translator of Tamil texts to English while the other chose to live in Pondicherry because it is close to other cities in South India where his gurus live. Also, in the *ashram* guest houses where I lived, I met several people who were very respectful of Sri Aurobindo and Mother but did not consider themselves followers. They were affiliated with other schools of yoga and gurus, but were living in the *ashram* guest houses during their temporary stay in Pondicherry. I struck a strong rapport with some of them and regularly engaged with them for the duration of their stay in Pondicherry. Given that some of my interlocutors were not affiliated with Sri Aurobindo *ashram* in any capacity also broadened the scope of my thesis from looking at followers of Integral Yoga to a wider range of expatriates in Pondicherry.

From spiritual tourists to expatriates

As discussed earlier in the chapter, for reasons of sustained engagement, my focus shifted from doing field work among short-term tourists to frequent returnees and long-term expatriates²³. Over the course of fieldwork done mainly in two phases from November 2013 to March 2015²⁴, I engaged with more than fifty people of various nationalities. Several of them have been living in Pondicherry for at least a decade. To give an idea: Frank, an American follower of Sri Aurobindo and Mother, has been living in Pondicherry for 12 years now; Jerry, an American *ashramite*, has been in Pondicherry for more than 40 years; Shannon, an American follower of Sri Aurobindo and Mother, lived in Auroville²⁵ from about 1971 to 1990, then went back to the United States, and subsequently returned to Pondicherry in 2005 where she continues to live; Yvonne and Eva, both German *ashramites*, have now lived for over 30 years in the *ashram*; Kiran, an American woman who travelled to India for the first time in 1979 and subsequently to join the community of an

²³ Ulf Hannerz (1996) defines expatriates as, “people who have chosen to live abroad for some period, and who know when they are there that they can go home when it suits them” (106). This description applies very well to my interlocutors although, after years of living in India, for many it is simply not practical to return home. They have made new lives in India. But the choice in principle remains, in stark contrast to labour migrants and refugees whose option of returning home remains forever deferred.

²⁴ My earliest impressions of Pondicherry were formed during 3 weeks’ preliminary research in October 2012.

²⁵ On Auroville, see Chapter 1.

Indian guru, Poonja ji²⁶ in Lucknow, has been living in India since the 1990s, now dividing her time between several places in India including Pondicherry, Thiruvanamallai and Kodaikanal; and the Western European woman Sally, whose gurus are in other South Indian cities, travelled to India toward the end of the 1960s' decade and except for a few years in England, she has lived in India since then (and specifically in Pondicherry since the 1980s).

Some of my other interlocutors have been visiting Pondicherry for many years since the time of their first visit. Many of them are practitioners of Integral Yoga, others spend a few months in Pondicherry before moving on to *ashrams* or yoga centres in other cities. Johann, for example, a German follower of Sri Aurobindo and Mother has been visiting Pondicherry since the late 1970s. Some of them, too, are in a transitional mode, moving from being frequent returnees to living in Pondicherry for longer, sustained periods of time. I met Amrita, an American woman, for the first time in November 2013 in the *ashram* guest house where I was staying. At the time, Amrita was visiting Pondicherry for 6 months from Australia where she had been living for the past 24 years. She visited India for the first time in the early 1980s to go to Ganeshpuri in Maharashtra, the *ashram* of an Indian guru called Swami Muktananda²⁷, and since then, whenever possible, she has been visiting India. In 2013, she told me that in the previous couple of years, she had been to Pondicherry more than once every year. But already, when I met her, she was contemplating moving to Pondicherry on an "entry visa" which gives the visa holder the option of living in India for 5 years. Amrita returned to Pondicherry the next year and by 2015, she had obtained the entry visa. Even as I write, Amrita has made herself at home in her rented two-room apartment in the "fishermen's village". Yet another interlocutor, Kenneth, a Canadian practitioner of Integral Yoga first travelled to India in 1972, met the Mother and spent the next 5 years in Pondicherry and Auroville, then returned to Canada while visiting Pondicherry as and when he could, and eventually moved to Pondicherry about 4 years ago.

Similar trajectories of movement, that is, the movement of people from affluent nations to less affluent ones are increasingly being studied as part of the conceptual category, "lifestyle migration". Michaela Benson and Karen O'Reilley (2009) describe lifestyle migration as, "the spatial mobility of relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that are meaningful because, for various reasons, they offer the potential of a better quality of life" (2). The migrants occupy a wide range in the demographics scale and what constitutes as a better quality of

²⁶ See Chapter 3 for brief biographical sketch of Poonja ji.

²⁷ See Chapter 3 for brief biographical sketch of Swami Muktananda.

life also varies. For instance, lifestyle migrants could refer to British retirees who own houses in Spain and either live there permanently or spend a few months there every year (Casado-Diaz 2009; O'Reilley 2000). Equally, the term is used for “Anglo”, that is, English-speaking women from America, Canada and New Zealand who married Italian men, gained Italian citizenship and lived in Italy for decades (Trundle 2009). The desire to have a better life elsewhere may be in terms of enjoying better weather, living cheaply, experiencing the thrills of living in “exotic” places, and escaping the pressures of familiar life at home. Despite the range of motivations, a key theme in the narratives of lifestyle migrants is the search for a more meaningful or authentic life in the elsewhere (Benson 2007; Benson and O'Reilley 2009), which is typically characterised as, “‘a return to the past’, in terms of ‘genuine’ social contacts and living in close connection with nature” (Korpela 2009, 21), recurrent themes in my interlocutors’ narratives.

At first glance, it might seem that lifestyle migrants are far removed from tourists due to the longer duration of their stay in a particular location. Indeed, it is this characterisation which made me choose the terms “expatriate” or “lifestyle migrants” over “tourists”. Many of my interlocutors too, even those who were on a 6 month tourist visa, differentiated themselves from short-term tourists on the basis of their interests, “we are not here for sightseeing”, and their familiarity with the place and people due to their regular visits. Amrita, before she had relocated to Pondicherry for 5 years, once retorted to an auto rickshaw driver who tried to charge her more than the going-rate, “I live here, I am not a tourist”. Yet, *conceptually*, authenticity has been central to understanding tourist motivations for travel, especially First World tourists’ desire for the exotic, ever since the publication of Dean MacCannell’s (1976) classic *The Tourist*²⁸. As MacCannell suggests, the modern Western tourist longs for an experience of a life and culture untouched by modernity in terms of commercialisation and technological advancements which are seen to corrupt cultural and individual innocence. “Subject-related modes of authenticity”, that is, “existential authenticity covering bodily feelings, emotional ties, identity construction and narration related to place”

²⁸ There have been various approaches and responses to the notion of authenticity in tourism. John Urry (1990) critiqued the search for authenticity as simplifying tourist expectations and motivations while Erik Cohen (1972) provided a typology of tourists based on their motivations where the search for authenticity is seen to be one of many different motivations. More recently, authors have distinguished “object-related” authenticity from “subject-related” authenticity where the former refers to the origin of toured objects (archaeological sites, artefacts in a museum, the ancientness or otherwise of certain rituals or customs) whereas the latter relates to existential experiences (Wang 1999; Knudsen and Waade 2010). It is the latter with which I am concerned in this thesis. Interestingly, in his study of Chinese urban tourists to Europe, Pal Nyiri (2005) indicates their lack of concern with authenticity in terms of ancientness of places and buildings. For them, “the newer the better” and they often expressed their disappointment to Nyiri regarding the lack of skyscrapers and ostentatious buildings. His study is an interesting counterpoint to MacCannell’s thesis.

(Knudsen and Waade 2010, 1) are central, both, in motivations of tourists and lifestyle migrants who wish to experience life in the elsewhere (Korpela 2010; Therrien 2013).

Thus, the historical-social construction of certain places as representing the qualities of a more authentic life revealing, “the role of imagination, myth and landscape within the decision to migrate” (Benson and O’Reilly 2009, 3), is crucial for short-term tourists as well as long-term expatriates. In the following pages, wherever I use the term expatriates or lifestyle migrants, it is for the purposes of pointing to the longer time periods spent in a place, but not without the awareness that expatriates constitute, along with tourists, a wide spectrum of mobilities. Specifically suited to the purposes of this thesis, the theme of imagining India as a distinctively spiritual place is resumed in the next chapter where I look at the historical construction of India as the premodern alter to the modern West. But let us consider here the material circumstances which make possible the sustenance of other places as idyllic retreats from the everyday life.

Lifestyle migrants characteristically leave more developed nations in favour of less affluent countries which offer them alternatively, a materially more abundant life at cheaper costs or a “simple” life not possible in their own countries. Several British couples living in Costa del Sol, Spain interviewed by O’Reilly (2000) had been made redundant in their jobs. As the cost of living in England was very high, they decided to move to Spain where they could live relatively comfortably off their savings. Similarly, Claudia Bell (2015) observes that one of the chief motivations of male Australian expats to move to Bali was the cheap living costs where one could rent a room for as low as AUD 30 a month (267). At the other end of the spectrum, many lifestyle migrants critique the career-oriented, consumerist and market driven lifestyles in their countries. They opt to relocate to less affluent nations for pursuing an alternative lifestyle which is less consumer oriented and not centred on mainstream careers (D’Andrea 2007; Korpela 2009). Such “expressive expatriates”²⁹ (D’Andrea 2007) or “bohemian lifestyle migrants”³⁰ (Korpela 2009) opt out of mainstream society and “state-market-morality” regimes (D’Andrea 2007, 4) in order to create, what they perceive as, more meaningful lives.

²⁹ By “expressive expatriates”, D’Andrea refers to European and North American people who express their individualism through Techno music (electronic music genres) and New Age spiritual practices and beliefs as a counter to more mainstream values of lifestyle and identity.

³⁰ Korpela (2009) describes her respondents as “bohemian” based on their “spiritual and artistic aspirations” which represent “countercultural, alternative values” (31). Most of them learn classical Indian music in Varanasi.

In the case of my interlocutors, a few of the non-*ashramites*³¹ receive pensions from their country of citizenship which when converted to Indian rupees, in a city like Pondicherry, is more than enough to live a comfortable life. Amrita receives pension from Australia which ensures that she can rent an apartment in Pondicherry, albeit not in the French Town where house rent is considerably more, hire auto rickshaws and taxis for commutation which would not be possible for most of her neighbours (local Tamils from low income groups), and travel by air to other Indian cities when she wanted to visit another *ashram* or meditation retreat centre. However, her privileged position is not lost on her. She often remarked that her pension made it possible for her to live without financial worries in Pondicherry, something that she would not have been able to do in Australia with the same sum of money. Some of my other interlocutors as well who received monetary support from their families in other developed countries were aware that their comfortable financial position was a result of the economic asymmetry between India and countries in the global North.

Lest it seem that there is a homogenous category of Westerners in Pondicherry or in India, I also want to point out that quite a few people without any institutional support – they were not *ashramites* – and minimal financial support from their families, occupied a precarious position in India. A young Swiss woman whom I had met during my first trip to Pondicherry had been living there for about 6 months but had almost run out of money by the time I met her. She was living on money borrowed from her father and looking to sell some of her paintings in Switzerland. She said, “At the beginning you think, ah yeah India [...] everything very cheap. But you know when you really live here, then it’s also the same”³². For many of my interlocutors, similar to D’Andrea’s and Korpela’s respondents, choosing to live a life like this is a matter of ethical choice, a choice that they have made as a critique of consumerist lifestyles. Thus, Kiran preferred to “live by her wits” wherever she was and had, over the years, figured different ways of earning money. As a trained cranio-therapist, she had given treatments to people while living in Thiruvanamallai. She said, “for

³¹ *Ashramites* are not supposed to be employed or have an income since the rationale of the *ashram* is that people be free of all material concerns so that they can concentrate on their spiritual practice. To this extent, the *ashram* looks after the *ashramites*’ basic needs of food, accommodation and other daily requirements. Due to the injunction to not have a source of income, I could not ask any of my *ashramite* interlocutors if they did receive financial support from other quarters as that could have led to strain in my relationship with them given the sensitivity of the topic. The *ashram*, however, displays its financial receipts and payment on its website as per the government of India regulations (<http://www.sriaurobindoashram.org/regulatory/>)

³² At the time when I first met her, her complexion was sallow and she was visibly stressed about her financial condition. However, I saw her again the next year when I returned to Pondicherry for field work, by chance in Auroville at a grocery store. She had clearly gained a few kilos which I took as a sign of improved circumstances. But before I could meet her and say hello, she had left on her motorbike and I did not get a chance to revive communication with her.

a while I was giving chi-gong lessons, for a while I was giving harmonium lessons, for a while I was baking bread on a little oven. That was when I first came here (India), in Lucknow I got a little gas canister and made a stack of cinnamon breads that I would sell every morning to people coming there”.

But the performance of frugality and a simple life often needs a global South, a product of modern colonisation, for its realisation. D’ Andrea (2007) argues, “While consumer societies, according to expatriates and marketing analysts alike, appear to be blindly marching toward the abyss of spiritual void, cultural dissent in the West often manifests itself in the will to escape toward marginal positions and locations” (10). And yet, as he continues, this is a direct result of capitalism and neoliberalism which has led to and continues to lead to the political and economic asymmetries which produce the margins of a globalising world for alternative forms of consumption. It is these possibilities of choice and alternative cultural consumption undergirded by economic and political differentiations to which I shall continue to revert in my subsequent chapters.

Doing fieldwork at home among Westerners³³

My first point of contact with people in the *ashram* was through a friend in Delhi who introduced me to a man associated with the *ashram*. The latter, in turn, put me in touch with some of my earliest interlocutors. *Ashram* guest houses also turned out to be a good place to meet visitors and frequent returnees, who again would introduce me to people they knew. Sometimes, I randomly walked up to people on the street, presented my research topic and struck up conversations. Some conversations materialised into enduring acquaintance and friendship, allowing me to meet them several times over my stay in Pondicherry. My fieldwork practices comprised of informal conversations, unstructured interviews and participant-observation. In addition to chatting with and interviewing people in cafes, offices, and homes, I also participated in the *ashram* dining hall, as mentioned before. While the work kept me too busy to interact with people during the two hour shifts, it did make me a known face among people. The “washing section” of the dining hall, where I rinsed dishes, is a large and relatively public space. After having their meals, people line up at the washing section and hand over their dishes to the volunteers which engages the diners and the volunteers in a momentary exchange. Although fleeting, over the days, regular diners started recognising and smiling at me, sometimes even engaging in casual banter. This helped me approach

³³ Parts of this section are included in an article titled, “The Politics of Location: Being a Native Anthropologist among Western Interlocutors in India”, accepted for publication by *Sites: A Journal of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies*.

some of them later as I was not a total stranger to them anymore. Often too I helped an *ashramite* in garden work in my guest house garden. With some others, I spent time at their home, and with a couple of other interlocutors I travelled to the neighbouring town of Thiruvanamallai on two separate occasions to visit Sri Ramana *ashram*.

Conversations were informal and I let them take their own course without imposing an interview structure³⁴. Nonetheless, some questions functioned as starting points, questions about how, why and when they first came to India and/or Pondicherry. Answers to these took different turns and twists, leading us to several other topics and themes. I recorded interviews on my phone if the interlocutor was comfortable with it, and most of them were. At times, during recording conversations, when I felt that my interlocutors were revealing intimate personal details in the flow of a conversation, I would ask them if they wanted me to stop recording, thus, reminding them that I was recording. However, some of my interlocutors did not feel comfortable with the conversations being recorded, for they felt that made our dialogue too formal. In those cases, I asked them if I may write notes while listening to them. Of them, most were comfortable with me writing notes, and one of them, an Italian interlocutor, would pause during our conversations to ensure that I had got the details right. He would also often enthusiastically point out what he thought were important points for me to note down. Then again, a couple of my interlocutors did not feel comfortable with me making notes. As one of them, when I asked her permission to make notes, said to me, “just listen”. In such situations, I explained to them that I would make notes from memory when I got back to my guest house³⁵, which they had no objection to. I clarified to all of them that they could refuse to answer any question, feel free to ask me questions, and also decide not to participate in the research at any time.

Sometimes relevant topics would simply crop up randomly in conversations and I would make explicit reference to my thesis, again, to remind them that I was talking to them with regards my research. A few times, my interlocutors told me that they did not want me to use that particular conversation in my thesis. Naturally, I complied with their wishes. But these instances reassured me that they felt comfortable enough with me to exercise their agency and also that they were aware of

³⁴ I obtained Human Ethics clearance from the Human Ethics Committee at my university for this research. My application clearly explained that the research method would constitute informal interviews conducted at a place of my interlocutors' choice. It also explained how interviewees would be recruited, which I have discussed above.

³⁵ Where my interlocutors' narratives are not inserted within quotations marks, they are paraphrases of their statements. As mentioned, those of my interlocutors who did not wish me to record their narratives or take notes knew that I would be making notes at home and paraphrasing their statements.

my researcher role. There were also some private gatherings I was invited to where it was clear that I had been invited as a friend. I have not used any of those conversations I was privy to there. I have also maintained contact with some of my interlocutors through emails. This is not in breach of their privacy. To the contrary, they wanted me to stay in touch with them. One of my interlocutors, in fact, reproached me slightly for not having emailed him in a while. There was, thus, no question of having interrupted his privacy.

All names used in this thesis are pseudonyms to protect their identity. I have also refrained from using the specific name of a country or *ashram* where this could reveal the identity of the person concerned. For instance, the woman I have called Sally, told me not to mention her nationality. It is for this reason that I refer to her as being Western European. Similarly, where mentioning details about an *ashram* could identify my interlocutor, I have deliberately desisted from doing so. All conversations with North American and European interlocutors were in English.

Here I must mention my approach to Indians in the field. I started this project with the aim of including voices of local Pondicherians as well in my work. However, during field work, due to several factors, I could not interact with many locals. I cannot speak Tamil and this prevented me from establishing contact with local Tamils in the city, many of whom are not fluent in Hindi and English. I decided against an interpreter because of issues of reliability and translation. I was also on a limited budget and hiring an interpreter seemed financially infeasible. However, I did engage with Indians associated with the *ashram* with whom I conversed in English, Hindi and Bengali (many Indians in the *ashram* are Bengali given Sri Aurobindo's Bengali ethnicity). I also spoke with two Indian tour guides whom I was introduced to by some of my acquaintances in the *ashram*, and an Indian family living in the city. Nevertheless, I was unable to engage with them as intensively as I did with the Westerners. This was partly because of the focus of my project and partly because many Indians I became acquainted with regarded me as someone who needed to be helped with her work but they did not see themselves as being my interviewees. Even when I requested them for interviews, mostly these requests were treated as one-off cases and not as the basis of being part of a research project in a sustained manner. Subsequently, I decided to concentrate on the Westerners in order to establish a strong rapport with them. I have included narratives of some of my Indian interlocutors in this thesis as and when I deem necessary. But a more intensive consideration of the many Indian voices would be the concern of a future project.

However, being an Indian anthropologist engaging with a predominantly Western population in Pondicherry raised important issues on the politics of location, that is, being an "insider/outsider".

Questions of inclusion and exclusion, in the sense of “going native” or not being “native” enough have undergirded ethnographic fieldwork since the time of Malinowski, as European anthropologists sought to study the “exotic other”. To overcome the cultural gap between anthropologist and subjects, some natives were trained as anthropologists in their own right. Young and Meneley discuss the training of native anthropologists by Boas, “As a way of extending understanding of the ‘aboriginal mentality’, he trained native ethnographers, locals, and women anthropologists [...]he assumed a native ethnographer would achieve a fuller understanding by being a member of the group” (cited in Leibing and Mclean 2007, 10-11).

Although an insider’s perspective was simply supposed to offer a more accurate analysis of the indigenous culture, native or indigenous anthropology took on a political dimension as non-Western academics began to challenge the hegemony of Western anthropologists studying *their* culture. In Japan, for instance, Kunio Yanagita insisted that only Japanese academics could truly appreciate Japanese culture such that non-native academics studying Japan were seen as “outsiders” (Kuwayama 2005). M.N. Srinivas, one of the most illustrious Indian sociologists, wrote that it would be difficult for European anthropologists to gain the same in-depth understanding of Indian society as him even after years of research in India (Narayan 1993, 672). Such “cultural nationalism” (Kuwayama 2005, 98), although meant to reinstate natives as active agents of knowledge production, nevertheless left unchallenged the category of the native which ironically has been fetishised by colonialists, Orientalists and Western anthropologists. Frozen in space (Appadurai 1988) and time (Gordon 2013), the native was constructed as the authentic embodiment of an undistorted, atemporal history and culture. The same issues that haunt the construct of native also underlie the category of native anthropologist. In Appadurai’s words, the “metonymic freezing” (cited in Clifford 1997, 24) that produced the native as ahistorical, atemporal and immobilised was also the producer of the native anthropologist as belonging to that same ahistorical, atemporal and immobilised people, therefore capable of representing it most authentically.

Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) and Kirin Narayan (1993) strongly critique the essentialising tag of native anthropologist which presumes that she can, as a native, represent the culture as it truly is. Claims about the native anthropologist’s absolute authority over the local culture naively irons over differences of gender, class, occupation, and religion which may be more relevant to determining the researcher’s position among her participants than shared ethnicity and/or nationality (Morosanu

2015)³⁶. Thus, Kirin Narayan (1993) recalls constantly negotiating with others' opinions, alternatively disparaging and envious, of her status as an American-return (half) Indian researcher doing research in India. The issue of "return" adds further complications – many anthropologists doing research at home have been trained in the West (M.N. Srinivas, for instance, was trained in Britain). Not only does this presume training in a Western pedagogy but also, as in my case, it speaks of a privileged socio-economic location which makes possible migration to Western universities. Reflecting on internal differentiations among natives becomes all the more pertinent, then, to native anthropologists.

However, while viewing the ethnographer and participants in terms of "in-betweenness", "multiple positionalities", and "hybridity" is very important, this still presumes shared ethnicity between ethnographer and participants. Instead we need to pay more attention to the changing nature of home due to newer forms of mobility, such as those seen in the case of lifestyle migration. Acknowledging these forms of mobility and migration alert us to the changing dynamics of fieldwork at home whereby the native anthropologist need no longer be doing research with the "local" community. Rather, it is now possible for the non-Western anthropologist to do fieldwork among Western participants in the non-West as in my case.

Matters are further complicated when we consider that notions of insidership as implied by the terms indigenous or native anthropologist and anthropology-at-home presumes "the researcher's affiliation with a particular nation-state, culture, or ethnic group" (Fahim and Helmer 1980, 645), a very broad spectrum of affiliatory units. Thus, I, Bengali born and raised in Delhi could apply the tag native to myself whether I do ethnography in Pondicherry in South India or up north in Rishikesh, by way of their inclusion within the territorial boundaries of India. Without a doubt, I am an insider by way of citizenship while my interlocutors are outsiders in that sense. It was also the familiarity borne of my citizenship and cultural affiliation in terms of speaking Hindi and Bengali, acting according to certain norms and customs that made some of my Indian acquaintances treat me as one would a younger family member – indulgently but not too seriously - which affected my ability to interview them on a sustained basis, as previously discussed.

But simultaneously, I was an outsider in many ways. I was not a devotee of Sri Aurobindo and Mother. In one of the earliest emails I sent to a friend of a friend - the former being a young Indian woman who had graduated from the *ashram* school – I was pulled up for writing "Aurobindo

³⁶ See also Fahim and Helmer (1980); Halstead (2001); and Jackson (1980), all on the complexities of insider/outsider location of the anthropologist "at home".

Ghose” instead of the honorific “*Sri Aurobindo*”. Also, many Westerners in the *ashram* and the city in general have been living and travelling there almost every year since before I was born. This gives them an insider position which I cannot claim for myself. Not only do many of them speak the local language, Tamil, which I have no fluency in but more importantly they are entrenched in the life of the *ashram*. This hit home on my second visit to Pondicherry. On that visit, as I reached the *ashram* guest house where I was meant to be staying, I saw Emil, a Finnish man in his 50s, standing in front of the gate smoking. He usually comes to India every year during Europe’s winter months. He has been doing this for more than 20 years now and for the past 3 years whenever he goes to Pondicherry, he stays in this particular guest house. He is so much a part of life there that despite his movement to and from Pondicherry, he is in many ways a resident. Since the previous year he had volunteered to do some of the guest house work like entering people’s details in the guest register when they arrived and giving them dining hall meal coupons. Emil went into the office to enter my details in the guests’ register. Everyone takes off their shoes at the main entrance of the Guest House, a common Hindu custom before entering homes or temples. Certainly no one enters the office - which has a photograph of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo – with shoes on. The office has a quiet and peaceful atmosphere and almost feels like the sanctum sanctorum of the Guest House. On that day, I was wearing canvas shoes and felt too lazy to take them off to enter the office. I asked Emil if I may enter the office with my shoes on. “Nooo! You have forgotten already!” he exclaimed good naturedly

People like Emil, despite their intimate familiarity with the *ashram* life, are nevertheless suspect in the eyes of some. During fieldwork I happened to meet a Bengali Indian woman who has been teaching yoga in Paris for the past 32 years. Walking along the *Ganesh* temple road next to the *ashram* dining hall, I explained to her that I am interested in the motivations and experiences of Westerners who come to India for spirituality. Hearing this, she stopped abruptly on the street, closed her eyes for a few seconds, and then opening them told me in an almost prophetic tone, “they understand nothing of spirituality. They come here only to gawk at us, because it’s cheap and because the weather is good. All they understand is mind, money and matter”. I bumped into her by chance another day and in all seriousness she reiterated her sentiments, “A student (in Paris) asked me, ‘How can I be spiritual’? And I told her, ‘You can’t. You will have to be born as an Indian in your next life’”. Her exclusivist world view³⁷ would never accept Emil as a legitimate insider. Yet,

³⁷ The Bengali woman’s views represent popular imaginaries of the Westerners as inherently spiritually lacking. Some of my Indian interlocutors’ views on the Westerners’ presumed spiritual lack is taken up again in Chapter 2. Also, see Jouhki (2006) for the “Occidental” views of Tamil villagers in Auroville.

I, an Indian born Hindu, in contrast to Emil was experientially distant from the sacred environment and in that sense hovered outside the space that Emil inhabited more “naturally” than I did.

Simultaneously, in lightly reprimanding me for “forgetting” to take off my shoes, was Emil implicitly commenting on another kind of forgetfulness on my part, of forgetting how to be *truly* Indian by overlooking the custom of taking off my shoes before entering a sacred space? “How is the notion of ‘Indian-ness’ to be translated? What constitutes ‘Indian-ness’? Who defines it?” (Sinha 2005, 148). These issues emerged time and time again in Puducherry for, my “Indian-ness” or the lack of it often came under close scrutiny by both Indians and Westerners there. My lack of inhibitions in talking to strangers, the fact that I was now living by myself in New Zealand, had travelled alone to Pondicherry and had no family there, and fluency in English (all of which resulted from my urban, middle-class upbringing) made it possible for me to build close friendships with many of the Westerners there. But it often also raised incredulous comments like, “Do you know how unlike Indian girls you are?” While the American interlocutor who had rhetorically asked me this had meant it in an appreciative manner, it left me flummoxed. What exactly are Indian girls supposed to be like? Imaginaries of Indian women, historically rooted in colonial representations, have routinely portrayed them as the absolute other to the supposedly empowered European woman (Mohanty 1991; Spivak 1988). In her study of European women backpackers in Varanasi, Korpela (2006) finds that their views on Indian women were similar to colonial perceptions of Indian women as largely traditional and passive, the ultimate symbol of India’s “backwardness”. Korpela’s findings are not very different to some of my interlocutors’ views about Indian women. This despite the fact that Pondicherry attracts many middle-class, working, young women travelling independently or with friends from neighbouring cities such as Chennai. I found it surprising that the young women’s obvious physical presence every weekend on the sea-side promenade and the numerous cafes had not countered images of Indian girls as lacking agency. Further, the topos of the native woman was the marker against which my own Indian-ness or nativity came to be judged.

In not inhabiting the subject position of the so-called “Indian girl”, where exactly was I located vis-à-vis my interlocutors? On the one hand, my seeming distance from the “Indian girl” placed me much closer to my interlocutors insofar as I was perceived more like them in being independent and outspoken. The fact that I live in New Zealand away from family was taken to be a sign of my cosmopolitanism. Important to note that my friendly relations with the Westerners was also highly indicative of my urban, middle-class upbringing which placed me at a cultural distance from some Indians. A Bengali woman, Rina, in her late 30s who had migrated to Pondicherry from Kolkata with her two young children, also used to work as a volunteer in the *ashram* dining hall with me. I

later found out her husband had lost his job and she was struggling to make ends meet. One afternoon, when I was cheerfully greeting my friends and acquaintances over the din of the clanging dishes, Rina who can barely speak English remarked to me wistfully, “*onek foreigner der cheno tai na?*” (“You know many foreigners, don’t you?”). Her tone made me realise that my proximity to “the foreigners” was not simply the result of my friendliness or their generosity in giving me their time (although it was that too). My socio-economic position was the specific condition of the possibility of these relations. The same conditions which were at times deemed to be untrue to the essence of being Indian.

For some of my Western interlocutors, my “difference” was simply a marker of changing times. But for some (although certainly not for all), the changes had a distinctly inauthentic ring to them. One evening I was sitting in my guest house garden and casually chatting with Yvonne, a German *ashramite*, and Rachel, an Israeli woman who lived in Varanasi for many years learning Hindu philosophy and who now frequently visits India from Israel. As we were chatting, Yvonne brought out her *tiffin*³⁸ carrier full of lentil soup and offered us her food. Rachel declined but I enthusiastically dunked pieces of bread into the soup. Yvonne left after some time leaving me and Rachel by ourselves. Turning to me, Rachel expressed her utter disbelief at my “un-Indian” behaviour of sharing food from the same container as Yvonne. Rachel said she had never seen any Indian eat like that, especially in Varanasi where people are more “orthodox”. She said that she too cannot eat like that anymore, “it’s in my blood now”, and that she fully believed in the logic of not sharing utensils – for hygiene. But “you’re young and modern, Western” she said. She repeated a couple of times her amazement to see me sharing food with someone else. But she also kept reminding herself that I was young and Western.

Rachel, it seems, had “gone native” (“it is in my blood now”), she wore *salwar kameez*, could speak in Hindi and had adopted the custom of avoiding *jutha*. *Jutha* means left over or half eaten food and is customarily not eaten by Hindus for reasons of ritual pollution, “because it may have been touched by the first person’s hand and polluting saliva” (Fuller 2004, 77). The notion of *jutha* has traditionally also been a way of maintaining caste hierarchy, for the polluted left over food on the plate of a “higher” caste person is considered pure enough to be consumed by a “lower” caste person but not vice versa (Parry 2004, 5). However, this history finds no mention in Rachel’s understanding and adoption of high-caste Hindu customs. While Rachel explains that she follows this practice for hygiene, she balks at my betrayal of this custom as evidence of Westernisation

³⁸ A steel lunch box with containers stacked one on top of another.

instead of recognising it as rejection of caste practices. Further, while her own hybridity – an Israeli woman dabbling in Indian metaphysics – posed no problem to herself, hybridity on my part – a Hindu woman who rejects caste practices without denouncing Hinduism per se - was seen as symptomatic of inauthenticity.

Even as I moved from the Global South to the North, my interlocutors moved from the Global North to the South. Further, I returned to the South to do research among Westerners now living in the South. These movements had significant ramifications for how I, as an Indian anthropologist doing fieldwork in India, was constructed by some of my expatriate interlocutors even as they claimed an authorial position for themselves. In some instances, it was as if their own authenticity was measured against my apperceived lack of it. Undoubtedly, insofar as many of my interlocutors have been living in Pondicherry for decades, and some are frequent returnees to India, they are insiders to the life of the spiritual community there. They have formed ties of intimacy and care with other *ashramites*, visitors and locals. On the other hand I was an outsider, for I was new to the *ashram*, not a devotee, and I was there to learn more from them about the *ashram* life and their lives in India. But their assertions of insidership whether that be via performance of Indian-ness through adaptation-appropriation of Hindu customs such as taking off shoes or not eating *jutha* or via laying claims to the supposed Indian *essence* of spirituality without performing Indian-ness were often legitimised by taking recourse to the imaginary figure of the non-modern native. While I had no illusions from the very beginning that I occupied shifting locations – sometimes an insider, sometimes an outsider – in the field, these locations were mediated through the construct of authenticity. To these issues of ideal constructions of Indian identity and the notion of authenticity, I will return again in the following chapters.

Chapter outline

Having set out the central research question and introducing the genre of interlocutors who constitute this research, the following chapters address in several interconnected ways the lives and stories of those Westerners in Pondicherry who have sought to construct an alternative world for themselves. In Chapter 1, *The Bigger Picture*, I elaborate on the central argument mentioned at the beginning of this chapter while situating the concerns of this thesis within a broader, historical framework. I shall look at the antimodernist impulse in the historical emphasis on unmediated experience as being central to spirituality. At the same time, I will consider the ways in which spirituality and India get intertwined in Orientalist discourse. While not proposing tracing a linear historical trajectory, nevertheless, I will point to some themes in these discourses which continue to

resonate in contemporary narratives of spirituality and its spatial unfolding through travels to India in particular and the non-West in general. Important also in this story is the role of Indian nationalists and gurus who posit India as the counter to Western “materialism”. Here, I introduce Sri Aurobindo who was a nationalist turned yogi and discuss his teachings along with those of the Mother. A general overview of their teachings is helpful to keep in mind for the subsequent chapters.

Having historically situated the discourse of spirituality and spiritual India, I proceed to look at the narratives of my interlocutors. Following Chapter 1, the thesis is divided into two parts, *Journeys and Movement*, and *Settled Lives*. Both parts consist of two chapters each.

Journeys and Movement:

The two chapters in this part look at narratives of movement, that is, physical travel to India, meandering to neo-Hindu teachings, and journeys across several gurus and *ashrams* in the personal spiritual quest. In Chapter 2 titled *Travelling Eastward: Arrival Narratives and the Re-enchantment of India*, I consider the religious experimentation with neo-Hindu teachings in the 1960s United States and parts of Western Europe. My interlocutors’ narratives of why, when and how they first travelled to India tell about their disenchantment with the West and their fascination with the non-West as an attempt to re-enchant their lives experienced as purposeless and alienated. Their arrival narratives are, then, as much about departure from the familiar as they are about arrival into the mysterious other.

The theme of movement is carried forward into the next chapter, albeit focusing on reverse movement. That is, where Chapter 2 looks at the movement of seekers from the West to India, Chapter 3 titled *Travelling Westward: Place Enchantment and the Global Network of Indian Spirituality* looks at the reverse movement of modern Indian gurus to the West. The chapter shows how the global network of Indian spirituality is successful in locating India as the place of ancient spirituality even as gurus move beyond the geo-political territory of India to universalise their teachings. Thus, I locate the arrival narratives of some of my interlocutors within such cross-cutting movements of people from the West to the East and the East to the West.

Settled Lives:

Where the previous two chapters focused on spiritual seeking, the two chapters in this part focus on my interlocutors’ settled lives. In other words, these two chapters ask, what happened to my interlocutors following their journey to India? How do they perceive their selves and their life in the

country they now call home? One of the major themes that emerge in my interlocutors' arrival narratives is that of the disenchanted self. Many of them travelled to India looking for a guru or an *ashram* where they would be able to engage with like-minded people and, more than anything else, find their authentic selves. The discourse and practices of reconstructing an authentic selfhood is the topic of Chapter 4, *Re-enchanting the Self: The Discourse and Praxis of Authentic Selfhood*. Here I specifically look at the seekers' affective encounter with gurus and the discourse of "surrendering", "*karma*", "connection" and "calling" which enable many of my interlocutors to recraft their identity as part of a bigger, "more-than-human" cosmic belonging.

Even as many are deeply attached to their gurus and have formed their lives in India, how do they see India after years of living there? In Chapter 5, *At Home in India? The Enchantments and Disenchantments of Life in the Elsewhere*, I bring out the tensions of making home in India as imaginaries of a hyperreal spiritual India collide with the everyday world. In the face of a rapidly globalising Indian economy, notions of a pure pristine past are harder than ever to sustain and the dichotomy of "spiritual India/material West" threatens to collapse taking away, it would seem, the notion of India as the West's spiritual refuge. At the same time, in this chapter, I point out the utopian aspirations of many of my interlocutors who see the world as moving toward a better future in which everyone has an equal status.

Lastly, in the conclusion, I summarise the main arguments made in this thesis. I also point to the wider implications of Westerners' relocating to India and creating it as the site of invoking antimodernist nostalgia for a mythical spiritual past seen to be lost forever in the West.

Chapter 1. The Bigger Picture

Introduction

This chapter provides a theoretical and historical background against which the ethnographic data of this research is foregrounded. In the introductory chapter, I briefly mentioned the central argument of my thesis. In the first section of this chapter, I begin with a discussion of antimodernism and multiple modernities to expand on my central argument, that the antimodern quest of my interlocutors represents, contrary to first appearances, an alternative modernity. In particular, I focus on the making of spirituality as an antimodern response to the apperceived crises of modernity. As I discuss in the second section, the centrality of mystical experience in the discourse of spirituality needs to be scrutinised to understand the modern historical shaping of this discourse which, simultaneously, brings to light the entanglements of spirituality, religion and secularity.

Even as the discourse of spirituality appears to be ahistorical and universalist in its appeal in that it claims to speak of a universal truth, the spatio-temporal logic of modernity in fact underwrites it. In the third section, then, I focus on the Orientalist views of India as an inherently spiritual place since it is considered to be premodern. I look at British colonial Orientalism as well as German Romanticism for the ways in which they upheld, predominantly, the Vedanta in their approach to the “ancient oriental wisdom” of India. However, it is important to point here that the emphasis on Vedanta was reappropriated by Hindu religious leaders in their spiritual discourse which is at the same time anti-colonial. They were instrumental in promoting India’s “ancient” spiritual teachings, further bolstering the view of India as essentially spiritual as opposed to the “materialistic” West, a perception that continues to be common as I found among my interlocutors. Sri Aurobindo is a key figure in this history, albeit often overlooked. The fourth section looks at his life and the development of his philosophy focusing on his anti-colonial nationalist stance and emphasis on the Vedanta.

Interestingly, Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual collaborator, the French woman, Mirra Alfassa, was active in occult circles in Europe before relocating to Pondicherry. This not only points to the cross-cultural engagements made possible by colonialism (since Pondicherry was a French colony), but also to the hermeneutics in Integral Yoga, the collective teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. I look at the Mother’s life briefly in section five and discuss the main tenets of Integral Yoga, which

show the influence of occultism. The Mother came to be at the helm of the administrative affairs of the *ashram* since 1926 when Sri Aurobindo withdrew from active public life. The last section of this chapter considers the development of the *ashram* and questions whether the apperceived distinction between spirituality and religion is at all tenable in the context of a well-run institution like the *ashram*, thus, returning full circle to the entanglement of religion and spirituality.

Antimodernism and multiple modernities in a transnational context

Antimodernism, so Arthur Versluis (2006) begins in his essay of the same name, is central to modernity. He writes that the word “modern” appeared in English language in the 17th century to contrast the present times with what was before, the “ancients” (ibid, 96). In German too, “*Neu Zeit*”, literally “new time”, a term used for modernity, appeared in the 17th century to distinguish the contemporary from the past whereby the past came to be designated in terms of epochs – “Antiquity” and “the Middle Ages” (Osborne 1992, 69). The periodisation of history, one of the defining characteristics of the idea of modernity, was accompanied by an implicit temporal valuation which, “bears within it an historical comparison, and the sense of progress or evolution to the present, which is by implication both consequent upon and perhaps superior to the past” (Versluis 2006, 97). On a similar note Peter Osborne (1992) notes that the neutral connotation of “*Neu Zeit*” underwent a qualitative shift during the Enlightenment period when the present modern day was no longer seen as simply following previous epochs but rather it was now seen as being, “a *qualitative transcendence* of the past [...] (with) a reorientation towards the future” (70, emphasis in original).

The categorisation of time into historical epochs was facilitated by technological advancements, most notably, the printed word (Versluis 2006, 97). Through books in personal and university libraries, the past became available and accessible in unprecedented ways. “The more ‘modern’, the more technologically and industrially sophisticated the means by which information is stored and disseminated; and so access to history, with ever greater specificity and breadth, is a modern phenomenon that replicates in itself the notion of progress” (ibid). Of course, technological advancements, especially maritime technology, ensured the domestication of history through colonisation, what Peter van der Veer (2014) calls “imperial modernity”, whereby the geopolitical configuration of the world comes to rest on differentiating the colonised societies from the colonisers in terms of non-contemporaneous temporalities. In other words, societies and peoples inhabiting the same historical time were nevertheless seen to embody different temporal rhythms – modern colonisers and premodern colonised. The temporal logic which divides history into

determinate periods of modern and premodern, thus, assumes a spatial characteristic by dividing the world into different temporal regions. Following van der Veer (*ibid*), in this chapter I concern myself with imperial modernity and how it constructs spirituality particularly in the ways in which it pertains to India via colonialism, Orientalism, Theosophical and American Transcendentalist thought, and Indian nationalism between 19th to 20th centuries. In the following sections, I shall discuss how the modern notions of progress and technological advancements based on the ideals of science and rationality were decried by counter-Enlightenment thinkers even as they made use of modern colonial ideals, structures and institutions in arriving at their critique. Spirituality emerges as a critique of modernity's emphasis on untrammelled progress, highlighting an acute sense of moral and ethical degradation which is at the heart of antimodernism.

As mentioned in the Introduction, in contrast to abiding faith in progress, antimodernism points to the dark side of technological and industrial development, bemoaning its destructive consequences in the realm of nature, culture and religion (Versluis 2006, 97). Yet, antimodernism is an integral part of modernity itself, for the alternatives proposed by antimodernists create the possibility of (temporarily) escaping from modernity, “without altering the actual conditions of society as whole” (*ibid*, 101). For instance, handicrafts, as a symbol of a lost tradition, were revived in the United States in the late 19th century as part of the Arts and Crafts movement, primarily by men of the educated upper classes, “who felt most cut off from ‘real life’ and most in need of moral and cultural regeneration” (Lears 1981, 61). Despite their attempt to overcome fragmentation and alienation, “the American craft ideal” focused not on a community of craftsmen but on revitalisation of the individual self. “In part a reaction against therapeutic self-absorption, the revival of handicraft ultimately became another form of therapy for an overcivilized bourgeoisie” (*ibid*, 65)³⁹.

Ian McKay's (1994) seminal study of the construction of the “folk” in 20th century Canada similarly talks about, “the ways in which urban cultural producers, pursuing their own interests and expressing their own view of things, constructed the Folk of the countryside as the romantic antithesis to everything they disliked about modern urban and industrial life” (4). He focuses, in particular, on the efforts of a young journalist, Helen Creighton, who descended on rural Nova Scotia to collect “authentic old ballads” from the region to sell to contemporary urban readers for

³⁹ As Lears (1981) notes, the American Arts and Crafts movement was influenced by European antimodernists such as John Ruskin and William Morris, both of whom critiqued art produced under capitalist working conditions in favour of medieval guilds of artisans. For a critique of Morris's premodernist socialism, see Davis 1996.

whom folklore had become a fashionable realm of curiosity (ibid). Creighton's fascination with the folk, McKay (ibid) demonstrates, was not just a reaction against modernity, but a result of it. Thus, her construction of the rural people's authentic lives was based on the historical construct, "of the 'noble savage' of Renaissance humanism and the 'noble peasant folk' of nineteenth century Romanticism" (ibid, 10). Romanticism was germane to the construction of the concept of folklore, as it was to the construction of an essential spiritual truth derived from the Orient, lamenting religious decline in Europe.

As van der Veer (2014) notes:

Already in the nineteenth century the concept of religion had become part of a narrative of decline or displacement [...] The gradual transformation of a transcendent hierarchical order into a modern immanence that is legitimated in popular sovereignty and is characterized by the market, the public sphere, and the nation-state has transformed the role of institutional religion and in some historical instances (but not in others) marginalized it, but at the same time freed a space for spirituality (8).

The entanglements of religion, spirituality and secularity will be discussed shortly, but let me mention here that the dominant trope of spirituality, as I found articulated by my interlocutors and which I trace back to the development of spirituality in the United States and Western Europe during the 19th and 20th centuries, is that, "even in religion 'the center cannot hold'" (Versluis 2006, 98). That is, organised religion is seen to be a part of the problem –the diminution of the true essence of all religions - and there is an attempt to find through other religions the core universal message which, teleologically, due to their supposed universality can be extracted from these very religions in order to be declared spiritual. The creation of the "mystical East", where India finds a key position, fulfilled an extremely important role in this historical trajectory, for in Romantic Orientalist discourse India was seen to embody ancient spirituality (King 1999a). Such perceptions continued to proliferate in the West, for instance, witnessing resurgence in the United States through the Beats' experimentation with Zen Buddhism in the 1950s and the relatively more widespread popularity of neo-Hindu teachings in the 1960s in the United States and parts of Western Europe. These inspired my interlocutors to travel Eastward in search of an authentic way of life. But while they point to the disenchantments of modernity, their antimodernism does not radically challenge it in that the same spatio-temporal logic characteristic of modernity is applied to locate the East and the West on the scale of transformation from the premodern to the modern. As Bruno Latour (1993) points out, "the antimoderns [...] accept modern temporality but reverse its direction. In order to wipe out progress or degeneracy, they want to return toward the past" (72).

However, the synonymisation of the East and the premodern is precisely what S.N. Eisenstadt (2000) critiques when he states that, “modernity and Westernization are not identical; Western patterns of modernity are not the only ‘authentic’ modernities, though they enjoy historical precedence and continue to be a basic reference point for others” (2-3). Instead, he argues, there are multiple modernities, that is, different ways of being modern in different parts of the world. In other words, multiple modernities points to the, “continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs” (ibid, 2). Although technological advancements and ideological and institutional developments of Western modernity may be seen to influence other nation-states especially the ex-colonised, Eisenstadt rejects the idea of a clear rupture between tradition and modernity, and past and present by suggesting that there are, “multiple and meandering routes to modernity derived from conflict and oscillation between and within cultures” (Lee 2013, 417). Thus, symbols of modernity and tradition are constantly reinterpreted and reappropriated in constituting entangled states of individual and collective being. The idea of multiple modernities is very well suited to the context of transnational movements of people and ideas connected by shared purposes, motivations and objectives across cultures, whereby such collective commonality can be seen as forming the bases of an alternative worldview and individual identity. In my thesis, I use Eisenstadt’s influential argument in the context of transnational movements of people, such as those of my interlocutors with shared purposes and motivations, to argue that their antimodernist spiritual discourse and practices are ultimately modern, albeit constituting a kind of alternative modernity.

I base my argument on the following: *First*, the alternative in the form of supposedly premodern India is in itself a modern creation available in the here-and-now due to colonialism, Orientalism, and Indian nationalism (including teachings of religious leaders or gurus). The sections below will deal with the former. With regards the latter, I argue that Hindu gurus from Swami Vivekananda onwards fundamentally altered the ways in which Hinduism was practiced and presented, indeed preached to the (non-Hindu) world. Despite their claims of being derived from ancient Vedic teachings, these teachers and their messages are very much a product of their times. As a result, although they reinvigorate the location of India, which is at once the geopolitical territory of the nation-state called India and the mythical abstract space of Vedic knowledge as well as *ṛṣis* and sages, the alternative that they propose is both nationalistic and global. *Second*, while there is a strong anticonsumerist stance in my interlocutors’ narratives, the romantic turn toward other faiths represents a different kind of consumerism. Again, modern gurus have played their part in selling their spiritual wares to the world. Thus, even while eschewing the language of consumerism, practices of guru choice, that is travelling to various gurus before finding the “right” guru, and

relocating to India in search of spirituality fail to strike out the principle of romantic consumption from their peregrinations. *Finally*, we shall see that the idea of progress is salient in the spiritual world view of many of my interlocutors. Based on the theories of spiritual evolution posited by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, many of their followers look forward to a world in which their selves will find full fruition by reconnecting the individual to a divinised world of interconnected authentic selves.

Each of these themes is elaborated on in the following chapters with the objective that, “addressed in this way, the new terms exemplify a departure from the idea of modernity as a historical, periodizing concept and a movement towards the simultaneous confrontation and co-optation of the past” (Lee 2013, 421).

The making of spirituality

Faced with the apperceived disenchantment of the world, “the antimoderns [...] take on the courageous task of saving what can be saved: souls, minds, emotions, interpersonal relations, the symbolic dimension, human warmth, local specificities, hermeneutics, the margins and the peripheries” (Latour 1993, 123). A discussion of spirituality is pertinent here, for the social construction of spirituality has been important for antimoderns in salvaging the soul from the apparent “shipwreck” of modernity. In her study of American New Age spiritual practitioners in New England, Courtney Bender (2010) delineates the problems facing academics writing on spirituality, “Defining spirituality and locating it within social life is notoriously difficult. Much like religion or experience, spirituality is bedevilled not by a lack of definitions but by an almost endless proliferation of them” (5). Spirituality can mean different things to different people usually connoting a wide range of terms and practices to do with, “‘meaning’, ‘purpose’, ‘happiness’, ‘belief’, and ‘well-being’” (Norman 2011, 112). But, Bender (2010) goes on, it is possible to arrive at an understanding of the concept if we take the view that spirituality, however we understand it today, is produced through a series of *entanglements* with history, institutions and social imagination. I follow Bender’s lead to show the construction of spirituality by situating it within history, institutions and imaginaries.

I must mention here that while some of my interlocutors willingly associated the label spiritual with themselves, there were others who did not because they rejected any kind of labelling. Of the latter,

some chose to call themselves “aspiring yogi”, “Mother’s children”, connected to the divine⁴⁰ or just by their names implying that they did not want to be fit into “the black box”⁴¹ of categories. In either case, certainly, my questioning and prodding played its part. I asked them if they thought of themselves as spiritual and what they meant by spirituality. Thus, their acceptance or rejection of the term was not entirely spontaneous. Yet, I have persisted in using and interrogating the concept because most of those who willingly called themselves spiritual and those who did not, nevertheless, shared similar interests and ideas about their world views and aspirations. As Bender (2010) notes about her respondents, “While my respondents tended to reject broad labels, they nonetheless recognized that others were fellow travelers, and that a number of groups and institutions promoted similar interests. Everyone I spoke with could identify other spiritual practitioners, groups and individuals in Cambridge, and their own maps and connections helped to round out my portrait” (6). Comparable to her experience, I too found that my interlocutors could and did identify other people as sharing similar interests. Most notably, their shared interests and understandings revolve not simply around what these are, but more centrally around what these are *not*: religious. I, thus, proceed with looking at the “spiritual but not religious” conception.

Opposition to organised religion is included in academic treatments of the concept of spirituality. Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) distinguish spirituality from organised religion in their project based in Kendal, a small town in north-west England. They argue that the “congregational domain” of Christianity represents “life-as” religion in contrast to “subjective-life” spirituality. By life-as religion, they refer to, “a hierarchical form of organization in which the most important decisions and activities were the responsibility of a small number of authorized personnel, who were nearly always male”. Within such organisational structures of regularly meeting congregational groups, “His (God’s) will is made known in the external, mediating authorities of text, tradition and community, and is to be willingly obeyed” (ibid, 15). In contrast, subjective-life spirituality, as the terminology suggests, is seen to cater to specifically individual needs of

⁴⁰ By the divine, they meant something more than human, the transcendental *principle*. For some this principle may have been personified and for others this was an abstract notion. For most of my interlocutors who were also followers of Sri Aurobindo and Mother, the divine was both personified in the form of the gurus and simultaneously an abstract principle. As we shall see later in the chapter, this view accords well with Sri Aurobindo’s writings on the *brahman*.

⁴¹ Latour (1999) talks of blackboxing as a concept in the sociology of science, relating to the opacity of technology which precludes us from knowing or appreciating its complexity. He writes, “When a machine runs efficiently, when a matter of fact is settled, one need focus only on its inputs and outputs and not on its internal complexity” (1999, 304). Extending this idea here, we could say that my interlocutors were refusing the opacity of categories relating to their subjecthood which obstructs from view the complex nature of their selves.

enhancing the self by tending to unique subjectivities wherein experientiality is of prime significance⁴². Thus, where religion is taken to mean hierarchical organisations and external authority, spirituality is taken to be inward oriented and deeply intimate, in keeping with its etymology referring to the Latin “spiritus” (breath of life), the Hebraic “ruah” (air or breath), the Greek “pneuma” (breath of life or life in the Spirit of God) or the German “geist” (spirit) (Carrette and King 2005, 34; Eck 1993, 151; van der Veer 2014, 35). Spirituality is, therefore, a modern Western term, albeit one with a long history which was reappropriated by Indian nationalists and later by gurus, “connecting several conceptual universes that are increasingly in contact” (van der Veer 2014, 44).

Alex Norman, in his book *Spiritual Tourism* (2011) argues, “what religion infers is institutional formations, whereas spirituality infers individual, and often individuated, practice [...] Spirituality in popular use thus carries connotations of being personalized, malleable and less structured in the way it approaches systems of practice” (112-3). Similarly, van der Veer (2014) notes that, “spirituality suggests something of higher value in distinction to the baser aspects of social life, including organized religion” (40). As I discuss later in this thesis, most of my interlocutors too turned toward alternative forms of faith based practices and beliefs in a bid to move away from organised religion, namely Christianity. Opposed to externally imposed and authoritarian structures of ecclesiastical order, they emphasise personal experience and individual transformation. Whereas religion is taken to be external, spirituality is taken to be fundamentally individual and intimate, derived in the ultimate instance from the self and personal experience (Bender 2010; Norman 2011; Rose 2001). However, although spirituality, in popular discourse, is based on an institutional/non-institutional dichotomy, it is precisely this binary which needs to be investigated to ask: *how* is spirituality institutionalised and *what* does spirituality institutionalise?

Spirituality needs clearly established organisations and institutions to flourish. All the people mentioned in this thesis are or have been associated with *ashrams* which have well established rules, practices and organisational hierarchies. Most of my expatriate interlocutors, in some form or the other, also are or have been a part of the institution of guru-*shishya* (teacher-disciple) relationship whereby they are initiated into a particular spiritual lineage or *parampara*. Sri Aurobindo *ashram* is different in this sense because Sri Aurobindo did not claim allegiance to any particular lineage, nor are there any formal initiation rites. However, insofar as practitioners of

⁴² Elsewhere, Heelas (1996) refers to such orientations as “self-spirituality” emphasising the centrality of the self in discourses of spirituality.

Integral Yoga do locate their spiritual learning primarily in the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, they can be seen as continuing in the guru-*shishya* tradition, albeit radically reinterpreted for present times. Besides, when the Mother was alive, those of my interlocutors who got the chance to have her *darshan* (sacred beholding) became convinced that she was their guru⁴³. *Darshan*, in this case, can be regarded as a form of initiation by sight. Reinterpreted traditions have, thus, become institutionalised in modern guru movements⁴⁴.

However, these are not necessarily recognised by many of my interlocutors as constituting organisational or institutional structures. Rather, they consider their association with *ashrams*, gurus and other followers as loosely consolidated groups of like-minded people who have come together for the purposes of doing their own individual spiritual practice. What is it, then, that makes possible the emphasis on the individual even when they are located within organisations and structures? I suggest it is due to the institutionalisation of the individual and personal experiences within the discourse of spirituality. What is taken to be spirituality occurs in reference to the apperceived essence of and within the institutional. Further, divorced from its immediate context of local practices and established order (in the case of Hinduism, this might be seen as hierarchy between the priest and the lay devotee), the true essence is seen to transgress such mundane forms in order to be available for personal experience by people irrespective of their religious beliefs or lack thereof.

Despite appearing self-evident and “naturally” universal, the emphasis on personal experientiality as being at the core of spirituality does have a history, “a relatively late and distinctively Western” one, in the words of Robert H. Sharf (1998, 98). Sharf (ibid) cites Wayne Proudfoot to state that arguments in favour of understanding religion⁴⁵ mainly through an emotionally charged experience of the divine were central to the ideas of the German liberal Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), “who argued that religion cannot be reduced to a system of beliefs or morality”. In Schleiermacher’s thought, we see the eulogisation of perennialist philosophy whereby he wrote in his 1799 classic *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* that all religions were animated by an “inner fire”, “Though it may long ago have degenerated into a long series of empty customs, into a system of abstract ideas and theories, will you not, when you examine the original

⁴³ See Chapter 4 for the section on *darshan*.

⁴⁴ Guru movements and initiation practices are discussed in Chapter 3.

⁴⁵ Note that while in the previous sentence I used the term “spirituality”, in the very next one I mentioned “religion”. In doing so, I have pre-empted my argument that spirituality is best understood through its engagements with religion, specifically Christianity, rather than strict opposition.

elements at the source, find that this dead dross was once the molten outpourings of the inner fire? Is there not in all religions more or less of the true nature of religion, as I have presented it to you?” (Schleiermacher 2006, 209)⁴⁶. Such *philosophia perennis* also came to feature in the works of several key figures who opposed the church, which I will touch upon below. Schleiermacher’s emphasis on the interiorisation of experience was motivated by his, “interest in freeing religious doctrine and practice from dependence on metaphysical beliefs and ecclesiastical institutions” (cited in Sharf, 1998, 98)⁴⁷. This is not to suggest that experience has not played a significant role in Christianity and other religions of the world. But rather, at issue here is the perception that experience is at the core of all religions. Located outside reason and orthodoxy, experience came to be seen as, “something one has rather than merely undergoes” which, “foregrounded the importance of inner faculties such as will, belief or pious awe, rather than the passive reception of stimuli from without” (Jay 2005, 79). The inimitable moment of experience was opposed to scientific inquiry and orthodox structures which were seen to have led to the erosion of personal authenticity.

Such perceptions are very common today in approaches to Hinduism and Buddhism, as Sharf (1998) notes, but these have not been produced in a historical vacuum. Despite the view among most of my interlocutors that their spiritual experiences have nothing to do with religion, the genealogy of experience shows that it is imbricated with the development of, “a universally available religious experience that took shape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” in the United States and parts of Western Europe, which provided, “enormous resources for theologians, laypeople, and social scientists to make the case for a universal religious sentiment” (Bender 2010, 10). Thus, Russell McCutcheon (1997) takes issue with Mircea Eliade’s conception of religion as a self-evidently experiential and individual-oriented category, arguing that, “the common assertion that religion per se or private religious experience in particular, is sui generis, unique and sociohistorically autonomous, is itself a scholarly representation that operates within, and assists in maintaining, a very specific set of discursive practices along with the institutions in which these discourses are articulated and reproduced” (3). A point corroborated by Tomoko Masuzawa’s (2005) argument that the understanding of there being, “an essential unity and sameness in all religions [...] revealed at their irreducible core” (315) has enabled the establishment

⁴⁶Digital version of the Third German Edition by Schleiermacher, print publication in 1893. <http://spiritual-minds.com/religion/philosophy/Schleiermacher%20-%20Speeches%20On%20Religion.pdf>

⁴⁷ See Martin Jay (2005) for a study of Schleiermacher’s influence on William Dilthey and Rudolf Otto. On the legacy of Schleiermacher in present times, it is interesting to note that although Schleiermacher aimed to legitimise his understanding of Christianity to a cultured and educated audience, similar views have been used for people to turn against Christianity since it is seen as being inimical to direct experience.

of the Western concept of “world religions”. The conception of religious experience is mediated by history and it is this historical production that also underpins the modern notion of spirituality.

Notions of authentic experience of the divine are also intertwined with the modern history of mysticism, and its consequent dehistoricisation and universalisation. As Leigh Schmidt (2003) contends, “Clearing the ground for the recovery of mysticism as a modern artifact is also important for making sense of the catchall term spirituality which has now spread itself so luxuriantly in contemporary Euro-American culture. Mysticism is, indeed, the great foundation upon which this revived love of spirituality has been built” (276). Schmidt diligently demonstrates that present day understanding of mysticism as the “universal quintessence of religious experience” gained currency in Euro-America in late 19th and early 20th centuries. Before that, mysticism was largely a part of Christian theology linked to devotional and exegetical habits (ibid, 276-77). However, through the 18th century, mysticism gained a bad reputation, being increasingly linked to “false religion” unworthy of consideration by the Enlightenment proponents of a rational religion which had no place for extravagance and misplaced exuberance⁴⁸. The positioning of mysticism as contradictory to reason was turned on its head in 19th century counter-Enlightenment thought when the same dichotomy of rationality versus experience was used to rescue mysticism from allegations of being false religion to its exaltation as, “the fountainhead of all genuine spirituality”⁴⁹, an idea also present in liberal Protestantism which desired, “a mysticism without ritual practices and without ascetic disciplines” (ibid, 281-82). Such ideas, “presented the possibility for a universal religion ‘of the spirit, not dogmatic, ecclesiastical, sacramental, or sectarian, Protestant as much as post-Protestant’. American (as well as European and Asian) academics established practices of comparative religion that were often rooted on phenomenological claims that the ‘world’s religions’ shared an underlying core of experience” (Bender 2010, 10)⁵⁰.

⁴⁸ See also Kant’s “categorical imperatives of morality” for the links between Enlightenment thought and its effect on thinkers and theologians in Europe (Jay 2005, 83-88)

⁴⁹ Clearly, counter-Enlightenment thought, “in its very reaction against Enlightenment tenets [...] was yet deeply influenced by it” (Hanegraaff 1996, 412). The distinction between Enlightenment/counter-Enlightenment is thus fuzzy, an argument we pre-empted in the earlier discussion on modern ideals running through antimodern values.

⁵⁰ The discourse of spirituality has often been posited as a deeply secular discourse wherein secularity is understood as opposed to religion, namely, Christianity and the institution of the church, placing the self at the forefront of meaning-making (Norman 2011). On the other hand, Heelas (2006) has argued that New Age spiritualities represent not the “last sigh of the secular” but in fact an alternative way of conceptualising religious practices and beliefs in contemporary Western society where the “sacred” is located “*within* the subjectivities of the self” (52). Clearly, both Norman and Heelas are making the same point, albeit

This view of mysticism was profoundly shaped by American Transcendentalists in whose hands, “the term was clearly being dislodged from both its Catholic and its Enlightenment roots. It was neither an ancient form of Christian divinity nor part of a critique of enthusiasm and sectarianism; instead it was becoming loosely spiritual, intuitive, emancipatory, and universal” (Schmidt 2003, 286). In the writings of one of the chief architects of the Transcendentalist movement, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82), we see the insistence on individual experience of a transpersonal divine principle. Emerson had given up a career as a Unitarian minister, and his emphasis on the perennial truth underlying all religions was divorced from church attendance, belief in Biblical dogma and the superiority of Jesus (Versluis 1993), that is, the structures which (according to Emerson) placed god outside the human soul. Thus, in the Divinity School Address, Emerson critiques Christian dogma and opposes it to spontaneous love emanating from the soul which, for him, embodies true faith:

Historical Christianity has fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion. As it appears to us, and as it has appeared for ages, it is not the doctrine of the soul, but an exaggeration of the personal, the positive, the ritual. It has dwelt, it dwells, with noxious exaggeration about the *person* of Jesus. The soul knows no persons. It invites every man to expand to the full circle of the universe, and will have no preferences but those of spontaneous love [...] That is always best which gives me to myself. The sublime is excited in me by the great stoical doctrine, Obey thyself. That which shows God in me, fortifies me. That which shows God out of me, makes me a wart and a wen (1838)⁵¹.

The idea of the “Over-Soul”, “a neo-Platonic World Soul or pantheistic Universal Mind that pervaded, enlivened, and spiritualised all of nature” was central to Emerson’s views (Clarke 1997, 85). Its echoes can be heard in the Divinity School Address where he speaks of the impersonal soul manifest in every human, showing “God within”. Emerson wrote that every human being’s soul was connected to this Over-Soul which flowed through everyone. It is this dual insistence on the individual and the divine, connected through the unbroken thread of mystical experience, that lives on in contemporary spiritual discourses⁵². Further, in Emerson’s thought, the East became intertwined with the search for common religious experience. Drawing on Orientalists such as

approaching it from different angles. Thus, instead of taking the religion versus secularity distinction at face value, we can see from the preceding and following discussion the ways in which the emphasis on interiorisation paved the way for secularity *and* newer forms of religiosity. I will return to the entanglements of secularity and spirituality below in the section on the Mother.

⁵¹ <http://www.emersoncentral.com/divaddr.htm>

⁵² See Rose’s (2001) survey of what people understand by spirituality where he finds that most of his respondents emphasise “connection”, that is, “keeping in touch with, relating with, being filled with, engaging with, coming closer with, moving towards, and union with the Divine, in whatever way the Divine was envisaged – theistically or non-theistically” (198). Also see Chapter 4 of this thesis.

William Jones and Charles Wilkins'⁵³ translations of Indian texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*, Emerson proclaimed not only that the source of spiritual wisdom lay Eastward but also that all religions hold the same truth. Emerson found support for his ideas in the Indian non-dualistic system of philosophy, *Advaita Vedanta*, in the concept of *brahman* (universal soul) which he used to further his ideas as well as generate interest in India and Hinduism.

Emerson's ideas greatly influenced his friend⁵⁴, the antimodern Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) for whom too India and Hinduism came to symbolise the unsullied truth of the spirit. From 1845 onwards, in the 2 years and 2 months that he spent in a cabin next to Walden Pond on Emerson's property, Thoreau turned to translations of Vedic texts, in particular the *Gita*. Thoreau, who never travelled to India, wrote in *Walden* (2008)⁵⁵, "In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvat Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial... I lay down the book and go to my well for water [...] The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges". At Walden, Thoreau claimed to have many mystical experiences and he drew on the Vedas to understand these (Goldberg 2010, 39-40). For him, retreat into nature was equally retreat into the ancient wisdom of the *Gita*, both signalling ultimately the retreat from modernity. Thoreau is also highly significant for our understanding of contemporary notions of spirituality, as he was one of the first Westerners to declare himself a practitioner of yoga. In a letter to a friend, Thoreau remarked, "Depend upon it, that, rude and careless as I am, I would fain practice the yoga faithfully [...] To some extent, and at rare intervals, even I am a yogi" (2013)⁵⁶.

Up to this point, in the West, yoga was seen as something, "altogether 'other'. Yoga, that is, was in no way perceived as an option to be taken up by Westerners; it was a phenomenon observed, studied and reported about in third person, as it were" (de Michelis 2004, 3). But Thoreau's

⁵³ See the following section for more on Jones and Wilkins.

⁵⁴ Emerson has also been cited as an inspiration for William James (1842-1910), American philosopher and psychologist – see James' address at the Emerson Centenary in Concord (1911, 12-20), see also Bense (2006). William James's book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) was influential in foregrounding experience as a valid psychological and, therefore, scientific object of study. Even while looking at different cultural and historical examples of people who have had mystical experience, the category of religious experience itself is considered to be universal as it must be in order to be studied scientifically. Thus, based on the categorical imperative of mystical experience, James defines religion as, "the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (49).

⁵⁵ <http://literature.proquest.com.ezproxy.canterbury.ac.nz/searchFulltext.do?id=Z001160285&divLevel=0&area=prose&DurUrl=Yes&forward=textsFT&queryType=findWork>

⁵⁶ <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/43523/43523-h/43523-h.htm>

endorsement of yoga shows a cultural shift, however limited at the time, in the perception of yoga as not only something that Westerners could do, but also as a viable spiritual alternative for those who had turned away from the church. It also shows the dis-location of yoga from Indian soil to its incorporation into wider discourses of universal truth seeking.

In the 20th century, American Transcendentalism came to have a great influence on the Beats and subsequently the, “in-your-face hippies of the 1960s, many of whom revered Emerson and Thoreau as their progenitors” (Goldberg 2010, 37). In the next chapter, I will look at the 1960s’ experimentation with Eastern spirituality and situate my interlocutors’ narratives within that context. It will, therefore, hardly be surprising to find the continuing legacy of Transcendental thought in their stories. However, this is not to say that there is an uninterrupted, linear trajectory straight from the 19th century to the next and the current one. But I have undertaken this modest historical portrayal of mystical and/or religious experience to point out what Wittgenstein calls “family resemblance”, that is, the idea of overlapping similarities “amongst the things that fall under a complex concept” (Yeung et al 2012, 226), in the case of spirituality and religion. The emphasis on an antinomian inward orientation which derives authority and authenticity from the experiencing self has a long and complex genealogy which, “behooves us to return to the question of individual spirituality as it has developed in relation to these naturalized understandings of experience” (Bender 2010, 12).

The abstraction of the spirit from structures of, what is understood as, religion is neither natural nor ahistorical. Instead, as this section has shown, the contemporary vocabulary of spirituality is intertwined with changing trends in religious belief across Europe and the United States in the wake of the Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment. Further, it is precisely this abstraction which makes it possible to argue for spirituality *within* religion –Christian spirituality, Hindu spirituality, Buddhist spirituality and so on. One of my interlocutors, a German man in his late 50s and exceptional among my interlocutors in his favouring of the term religion over spirituality, explained his preference in precisely those terms which were used by others to favour spirituality over religion. He said, “I don’t like the word spirituality. It seems for me to be an antagonism in itself, because you have to forget every word, too the word spirituality, to become the experience which is meant. Otherwise it is only a sign or a mark with the purpose, to give material to the pigeonhole thinking of some people”. I take his explanation as demonstrative of my argument that spirituality as a category is not distinct from but in fact entangled with religion in the form of religious individualism and unchurched, gnostic, experiential religiosity. I have, however, retained the term

to point to the popular insistence on the unmooring of religious individualism from familiar and well-established Christian structures, which occludes from view the phenomenon of participating in the structures of religious others.

At the same time, this unmooring affords opportunities for indulging in religious bricolage, shopping for faith in the world's spiritual supermarket. The privatised nature of religiosity was pointed out by Thomas Luckmann almost 50 years ago in *The Invisible Religion* (1967), wherein he argues that the erosion of the stronghold of Christianity has led to the individualised pursuit of "assortments of 'ultimate' meanings" (102)⁵⁷. A view that came to be labelled as "Sheilaism" by Robert Bellah (1985), referring to a system of private beliefs in which the individual self is the chief arbiter of meaning. The view of experience standing outside of and above structures enables movement across religio-cultural boundaries resulting in both cross-cultural hermeneutics and participation in, what Colin Campbell (1983) calls, "the consumer ethic". Several scholars have, in turn, critiqued the assertion of spiritual practices being steeped in consumption (Aupers and Houtman 2006; Heelas 2008; Norman 2011). Norman (2011) writes, "Modern spirituality is not a full participant in the consumer culture that Campbell portrays. It tends more towards paradigms of happiness and meaning in experiential, rather than acquisitive, terms" (133).

Yet experience itself, we could argue, has become something to be acquired, such acquisition representing not mainstream consumerism but a form of cultural consumption which may emerge as the basis of the former's critique but cannot wholly undo it. Heelas (2008) too argues that, "spiritualities of life" demonstrate, not shallow self-gratification, but "expressive humanism", where individual experiences are seen to be the basis of connection with something higher than the individual self, indeed diminishing the "ego", as well as connection with a community of like-minded people for whatever length of time. Both Norman and Heelas's findings are supported by my conversations with my expatriate interlocutors. As I shall discuss in Chapter 4, most of my interlocutors seek to connect with the divine, and further as I discuss in Chapter 5, many envisage a utopian future of a deeply ethical world where everyone thinks of the collective instead of

⁵⁷ Contemporary social science analyses of spirituality such as that of Paul Heelas is usually concerned with what is called "New Age" spiritual beliefs and practices. It is instructive at this point to remember the distinction drawn between New Age religion and New Age movement by Hanegraaff (1996) who states that the former refers to a set of shared beliefs that are anti-church and inward oriented which cohere in a self-aware *movement* from the mid-1970s onwards (521-22). Thus, while as a movement New Age refers to a relatively recent development beginning in the mid-1970s, as a system of beliefs and practices New Age has been around since the 19th century. When using the term New Age in my thesis, I refer to it as a system of anti-church practices and beliefs unless otherwise stated.

remaining focused on the individual self. And yet, as I shall argue, there remain tensions in the idealism of spiritual discourse and the realities of everyday life, which brings to light the entanglement of consumerist and anti or post-consumerist practices of seekers relocated in the elsewhere.

India and spirituality via Orientalism

“There are, it seems, no Western spiritual tourists who are wholly ignorant of India’s spiritual heritage and of the history of similar Western travellers venturing there in search of enlightenment” (Norman 2011, 140)⁵⁸. My interlocutors too seemed to be motivated by a vision of India as the land of spiritual enlightenment, an image constructed over centuries, in which history Orientalism has played a huge role. Edward Said’s canonical treatment of Orientalism has received much attention from both his supporters and detractors. Simply put, Said’s concern is with “the epistemological and ontological distinction between the Orient and the Occident” (Jouhki 2006, 23), and the ways in which the latter exercises domination and control over the former through this epistemological-ontological differentiation (Said 1979). Said (ibid) writes, “Orientalism is more particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a veridic discourse about the Orient (which is what, in its academic or scholarly form, it claims to be)” (6). Thus, the issue of power or cultural hegemony is moot here (Jouhki 2006, 26), whereby the Orient is produced through Orientalist discourse as an essentialised category which is crucial to the self-understanding of Europe – as culturally and morally superior - defined against its Other. More recently, Masuzawa (2005) has said, “What was at stake, then, in promoting the study of the Orient was nothing less than the rejuvenation of Europe, not by means of a return to what had been, however, but by mining the hitherto untapped resources (of the Orient) for the purpose of charting a new course, for the sake of an unprecedented future for Europe” (155). However, critics of Said have argued that just as he holds Orientalists guilty of producing a homogenous classification of “us” and “them”, so Said himself has produced a reified category of “Orientalism” (Heehs 2003; Oddie 2006; Trautmann 1997).

Peter Heehs (2003) argues that in portraying the Occident as having absolute power over the Orient, Said ironically ends up solidifying the idea of the Orientals as devoid of agency and, therefore, incapable of doing anything but being thoroughly subjugated by the former. Further, Said mainly considered imperial Orientalism, which is insufficient in explaining non-imperial forms of

⁵⁸ Also see Bandyopadhyay and Morais (2005) for American tourism media images of India as a spiritual travel destination.

Orientalism such as German Idealism which was hugely influential in promoting the idea of India as a deeply spiritual place with ancient spiritual wisdom. We will look at 19th century German Sanskritists' contribution to the enduring image of "spiritual India" below. While being cognisant of the very valid critiques made of Said, I shall, in this section, use the idea of Orientalism as a system of classifying reified *difference* between the East and the West, effacing internal heterogeneity – certainly attitudes to these differences vary among Orientalists (Heehs 2003), but particular tropes about the East and the West emerge as pivots on which differences are organised.

Although, as J. J. Clarke (1997) mentions, the Jesuit missionaries were some of the earliest people who brought Europe closer to India through their accounts of the people, their customs and apperceived religious beliefs, "it was the commercial interests of Europe, especially those of the East India Company, that provided the main vehicle for the passage of ideas between India and Europe in the Romantic period" (56). The study of India came to be canonised by the British administrator and Supreme Court Judge of India, William Jones (1746-1794), through the founding of The Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784 for the purposes of encouraging studies on the Orient, particularly India, and constituting an important "moment" in the history of Orientalist creation of India as a subject of knowledge. The Society was central to the cultivation of Orientalist interest in Sanskrit⁵⁹ and Jones himself has been held to be one of the chief figures responsible for the "textualisation" of Hinduism and its presentation as such to Europeans (King 1999b). British administrators were largely responsible for many of the first direct translations of Sanskrit texts to English and other modern European languages.

The concern with establishing a textual basis for Hinduism by the British Orientalists was partly a result of the colonial state's preference for written over oral authority and partly of the, "classical education and Protestant formation of most of the Company's servants" (Sweetman 2004, 13). Charles Wilkins's (1749-1836) translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* in English, the first such translation, and William Jones's translations of the *Gita Govinda* and the *Isa Upanishad* are some notable examples (recall that Emerson and Thoreau relied on these very translations to formulate

⁵⁹ See David Kopf's (1980) argument about the Asiatic Society as being at the helm of the "Bengal Renaissance". He argues that the Society and Orientalists like Jones helped indigenous religious and political leaders assert a positive image of Indians, specifically Hindus, in the face of highly negative perceptions of them by Indophobic British imperialists such as Thomas Babington Macaulay who held that the British were superior to Indians in every which way (499-506). However, Kopf's treatment of, what we could call, "positive Orientalism" seems quite exaggerated, for colonial prejudices about the lack of civility of the common Indian people are not absent in the texts of Jones and others British imperial Orientalists of the time.

their highly appreciative views of Indian spirituality). While Jones thought Indian culture to be the primitive form of European civilisation (Sugirtharajah 2003), he was also instrumental in, “the recovery of the glories of Hindu culture” (de Michelis 2004, 42), by concentrating on a utopian Vedic era. In encountering India, Jones argued that his fellow Europeans, “were not encountering a strange culture but their own in its primitive form” (Sugirtharajah 2003, 3). The modern temporalisation of India as the West’s now-outgrown childhood was instrumental in the glorification of India’s archaic, abstract past of which one caught glimpses in the Vedas⁶⁰. Versluis (1993) describes Jones’s translations of numerous scriptures as “Herculean efforts” which, “without exaggeration profoundly and almost single-handedly transformed the European view of Asia from the earlier presupposition of the East as barbarous, to a vision of an exotic and highly civilized world in its own right” (18). Thus, in the Second Anniversary Discourse of the Asiatic Society in 1785, Jones addressed the audience with the following message on Asia:

Although we must be conscious of our superior advancement in all kinds of useful knowledge, yet we ought not therefore to condemn (sic) the people of *Asia*, from whose researches into nature, works of art, and inventions of fancy, many valuable hints may be derived for our own improvement and advantage [...]we may decide on the whole, that reason and taste are the grand prerogatives of *European* minds, while the *Asiaticks* have soared to loftier heights in the sphere of imagination⁶¹.

The ascription of Asia and in particular India to the realm of the imagination was a recurring theme in Jones’s discourse, one that would also figure again and again in the discourse of German thinkers. Several motifs – the textual basis for Hinduism, glorification of India’s past seen in terms of a universally true metaphysics, and the consequent separation of the mass (everyday) practices from the abstracted glorious past – were common in the discourse of sympathetic British Orientalists. A Romantic glorification of India was nonetheless accompanied by distaste for the “natives” in their quotidian context who were seen to be, “submissive, indolent [...] unable to appreciate the fruits of freedom, desirous of being ruled by an absolute power, and sunk deeply in the mythology of an ancient religion” (Niranjana 1990, 773). It is only fitting with such views, then, that Jones should equate India with the skills of imagination, fantasy, arts and nature in contrast to the spheres of rationality, science and technology which Europe is deemed to excel in, allowing the latter to rule over India as a practical necessity. But where the Orientalist project of British imperialists slides from Romanticism “almost imperceptibly into the Utilitarian, Victorian enterprise of ‘improving’ the natives” (ibid, 775), the same Romantic themes figure prominently in

⁶⁰ Some of the earliest Indian scriptures written in Sanskrit, composed roughly between 16th and 6th century BCE.

⁶¹ http://www.eliohs.unifi.it/testi/700/jones/Jones_Discourse_2.html

the, “German delight in things Eastern and the golden age [...] (To them) the Oriental traditions represented a potential alternative to the rationalism and constraints, the empirical blinders of the Enlightenment” (Versluis 1993, 19). It is in the thought of leading German thinkers of 19th and 20th centuries where we find some of the most exuberant Romantic exaltation of Indian spirituality.

The textual availability of Vedic thought was highly influential on German Romantics’ conceptualisation of India in the 19th century and their self-perception derived from it. Jones’s translation of the Sanskrit poet, Kalidasa’s, epic *Sakuntala*, as Raymond Schwab points out, was Europe’s first encounter with authentic India (cited in Versluis, *ibid*). Although J.G. Herder (1744-1803), theologian and philosopher, was an enthusiastic proponent of India as the “cradle of civilization”, it was from the Schlegel brothers and Schopenhauer onwards that a thoroughly Romantic interest in India really took off (van der Veer 2014; Versluis 1993). The “mysticism” of the Upanisads had a strong impression on the likes of August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767-1845), Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854) and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860). From the late 18th century onwards, as King (1999a) notes, there had been increasing emphasis on the Vedanta (literally the end of the Vedas) – the corpus of texts known as the Upanisads – which move away from the ritualism of earlier texts and provide metaphysical interpretations of sacrificial rituals mentioned in the Vedas (119-122). The growing interest in mysticism in Europe at the time resonated with the metaphysics of the Upanisads, a point I will return to below. The German thinkers’ study of the Upanisads and interest in “oriental wisdom” was underscored by the idea that, “in the modern world something precious has been lost, on the level both of the individual and of humanity as a whole. The Romantic vision is characterized by the painful conviction that present reality lacks certain essential human values, values which have been ‘alienated’” (Sayre and Lowy 1984, 55). Thus, Friedrich Schlegel wrote of India’s intuitive “soul qualities”:

Equally, and even more strongly, apparent is the predominance of the imaginative faculty among the Indians, as is seen even in their sense and that peculiar tendency to mysticism which this faculty has imparted to the whole Indian philosophy [...] This decided and peculiar character of the whole intellectual character of the Indians will not permit us to doubt which of the various faculties of the soul is there the ruling and preponderant element (cited in Inden 1990, 68)

Schlegel’s imagination of India’s mysticism, exemplified for him in “the whole Indian philosophy”, was characteristic of the Idealists’ exaltation of India as the true home of the soul, and an alternative to the ideal of rationality. Equally, Schlegel believed that the “whole edifice of scientific thought among the Hindoos [...] in its form of sacred laws, systems and authentic commentaries

thereon” were imbued with the qualities of the soul (Schlegel cited in Versluis 1993, 19). For Schlegel, as for other thinkers of the time interested in the Orient, the assertion of Europe’s lost past in the form of India or the East did not need great or accurate knowledge of the latter. Rather, it served as a symbol for European thinkers of the alternative to modernity and its disenchantments. Nevertheless, Schlegel, as Herder, regarded Christianity as superior to the pantheism of Hindu religion which, in turn, they held to be the “most extreme aberration and failure” (Halbfass 1988, 77) of the spiritual message of the Vedanta.

The “critique of the European present” and its “spiritual impoverishment” (Halbfass 1988, 83) was highlighted in the thought of Schelling and Schopenhauer, highly influential German thinkers of the time. Where Schlegel, following his conversion to Catholicism in 1808, condemned Hindu pantheism, in contrast, Schelling defended pantheism (King 1999a) and held the Vedanta as the “most exalted idealism or spiritualism” (Schelling cited in Halbfass 1988, 102). However, the most enthusiastic reception of the Vedanta is found in the works of Schopenhauer who believed that Christianity was predated by India’s ancient wisdom and that the latter would change the course of European knowledge and thought (Oldmeadow 2004; Schwab 1984). In *The World as Will and as Idea* (Schopenhauer 1883, first edition published in 1818), Schopenhauer draws parallels between his ideas and Hinduism. Interestingly, he claimed that much of his own philosophy, drawing on Kantian ideas, could be found in the Upanisads. His lack of humility aside, Schopenhauer viewed, “Oriental philosophy not as a juvenile antecedent to the mature adulthood of Western Christendom but as a universal wisdom which was perennially alive and relevant” (Clarke 1997, 68), and a departure from what he saw as despiritualised Christianity (Halbfass 1988, 120)⁶². Further, Schopenhauer’s reliance on India as, “the land of the most ancient and most pristine wisdom” (Halbfass 1988, 112) was in line with his privileging of intuition over rationality enabling him to both, draw from India’s supposedly ancient intuitive wisdom as well as posit undifferentiability at the level of the deepest human nature such that it was only normal for him to turn to other religions (Clarke 1997, 68).

⁶² It is important to note here that G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) served a highly critical counter-point to the Romantic fascination with India. Although he too considered the concept of *brahman* as representing the true basis of religion, that is, monism, nonetheless he asserted that modern Western thought was superior to Indian philosophy (see Halbfass 1988, King 1999a).

In Schopenhauer's thought, we see a clear association being drawn between the message of the Vedanta, Buddhism and Christian mysticism⁶³. Thus, In *The World as Will and Representation* (1969), Schopenhauer writes:

In more developed Christianity, we see that seed of asceticism unfold into full flower in the writings of the Christian saints and mystics [...] the spirit of this development of Christianity is certainly nowhere so perfectly and powerfully expressed as in the writings of the German mystics, e.g. those of Meister Eckhart⁶⁴, and the justly famous book *Theologia Germanica* [...] But we find what we have called denial of the will-to-live still further developed, more variously expressed, and more vividly presented in the ancient works in the Sanskrit language than could be the case in the Christian Church and the Western world (386-87).

Schopenhauer was a self-proclaimed atheist, and in his philosophy we see the entanglement between spirituality and non-church religiosity through the emphasis on mysticism. In *The World as Will and Representation* (ibid), he offers a systematic exposition of his central philosophical tenets. According to Schopenhauer, the metaphysical foundation of the world is blind will which is directionless and purposeless (Halbfass 1988, 109). The ways in which the world appears to us is simply as appearance or representation, and in this regard he found resonance with the Indian concept of *maya* – illusion or appearance⁶⁵. However, the egoistic drive or “the will to live” attaches itself to these representations in order to survive. But once the true nature of the will is understood, “there is no other meaningful and legitimate goal than to achieve their cancellation” (ibid) which is attained through the “denial of the will-to-live”⁶⁶. In the figure of ancient Indian

⁶³ Such comparative analyses or, if one will, conjecture is also evident in the German Lutheran Theologian Rudolf Otto's (1869-1937) *Mysticism East and West* (1962, originally published in 1926) in which he compares the *sannyasis* of India to Christian mystics like Meister Eckhart, very similar to Schopenhauer's comparison. This is certainly not surprising, for the universalism of mysticism was a common trope among liberal German theologians or self-professed atheists like Schopenhauer.

⁶⁴ The Dominican theologian, Meister Eckhart's (1260-1328) teachings on the spiritual depths of the human's soul, and the presence of god in everyday things, lend themselves well to contemporary discourses of spirituality – see Eckhart's *Essential Sermons* (1981). In the 14th century, Eckhart's teachings appeared to be radical in orthodox Dominican circles and he was tried and found guilty of heresy. One of my German interlocutors, a follower of Sri Aurobindo, well into his 70s, spoke highly of Meister Eckhart as a mystic and his experiential knowledge. Also see Bender (2010) who writes about her respondents' references to Meister Eckhart.

⁶⁵ Schopenhauer's ideas as enumerated in *The World as Will and Representation* had a lasting impact on Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). In particular, he held Buddhist repudiation of the world as superior to Christian nihilism (Halbfass 1988). However, in his later life, Nietzsche rejected Schopenhauer's attitude to the world as an example of pessimism, which contradicted with his ideas of, “the great affirmation of the world and mankind which he anticipated for the future” (ibid, 126).

⁶⁶ The Buddhist concept of Nirvana appealed to Schopenhauer in that it matched his philosophical treatise on finding liberation from the world of appearances.

saints as well as the mystic, Schopenhauer finds exemplification of the denial of the will-to-live through their asceticism and rejection of “all outward works and religious practices as superfluous” (Schopenhauer 1969, 389)⁶⁷.

For European Orientalists, the philosophical orientation of texts such as the Upanisads and the Gita, “appealed to (their) anti-clerical and anti-ritualistic sentiments [...] and proved amenable to abstraction from their own context via an emphasis upon interiority. The allegorization of Vedic ritual found in the Upanisads could be applied to all religious practices and institutions, proving amenable to the growing interest in non-institutionalized forms of ‘spirituality’” (King 1999a, 122). As van der Veer (2014) notes, “Fundamental to this interest in ‘oriental wisdom’ was a growing sense in Germany, but also elsewhere in the Western world, that traditional Christianity had been dethroned by the Enlightenment and could not offer a modern spirituality” (45-46). The “mystic East” trope, evident in the writings of Schopenhauer, became an influential way of imagining India from the late 19th century onwards. Influenced by German Idealism, Max Mueller (1823-1900), German born philologist commissioned by the imperial British government to translate the Vedas, was instrumental, “in fetishizing the Vedas, representing them as the authentic embodiment of Hindu religiosity” (King 1999a, 128). As noted earlier, the Vedanta – especially the monistic idealism of non-dualist thought exemplified in the Advaita Vedanta of Saṅkara (roughly 8th century CE) – came to be glorified by Mueller and other Indologists as, “the paradigmatic example of the mystical nature of the Hindu religion” (ibid), and perennialist philosophy.

⁶⁷ Despite his compassionate call of seeing similarities across the human spectrum, the underbelly of Schopenhauer’s turn to Indian spirituality was in the form of ideas of racial purity and the search for a united Aryan origin, from which myth the Jews were systematically banished. Even as the creation of an essentialised past enabled the turn toward India as a source of re-enchantment for the antimodernists, the anti-Semitic Indo-Aryan theory of racial purity also facilitated some of the most horrendous acts of systematic violence in modern history. Sheldon Pollock, in *Deep Orientalism* (1993), analyses the ways in which German Orientalists used the mythology of a common Aryan ancestry to colonise the Other within Europe, namely the Jews. If Orientalism is understood as a wider discourse of power concerned with dividing people into moral superiors and inferiors and, therefore, domination of the former over the latter, then, Pollock (ibid) argues that Orientalism in the German context was used to construct the, “conception of a historical German essence” (83). Further, he notes that the work of several German Orientalists did in fact further the National Socialist discourse. For instance, Pollock cites the Sanskritist and Iranist Herman Guntert’s manifesto written in 1932, not long before the National Socialists came to power in April 1933, which states that Jews, despite having learnt to speak the same language, were essentially different insofar as they did not belong to the superior Aryan race. Thus, 20th century German Orientalists’ ideas extended notions of Aryan genetic superiority as propounded by earlier Orientalists, “from the world of dream into that of reality” (Pollock 1993, 86), facilitating the internal colonisation of Jews in Europe.

The European “discovery of the Vedanta” as the essence of Hinduism allowed British administrators to make sense of as well as domesticate the dizzying cultural and religious heterogeneity of Indians⁶⁸; liberal Christians such as Max Mueller to compare Hinduism with Christianity without necessarily relinquishing the posited superiority of Christianity (Mueller certainly did not relinquish such claims); and the German Romantics to deploy “Indian thought as a critique of a certain kind of quantifying, mechanistic way of thinking, and against the forms of rationalist and materialist philosophy which were becoming dominant modes of Western thought” (Clarke 1997, 69). Whatever the approach, the creation and continuation of the ideal of an ancient Indian spirituality tracing back the ancientness of Indian spirituality to the Vedas⁶⁹, especially the Vedanta, and the mysterious Vedic times owes much to Orientalism, and continues to proliferate in the Western imagination of India as an example of “historiographical commonplace [...] a claim about the past that is so well known that it no longer requires discussion” (Heehs 2006, 152).

However, the focus on Vedanta is not simply a European creation, rather as King (1999a) argues, “it seems more appropriate [...] to point to a *confluence of interests* which allowed the ‘discovery’ of Vedanta to come to the fore and remain largely uncontested until well into the twentieth century” (132). Hindu religious reformers in fact reappropriated the Western discourse on Vedantic Indian spirituality and, in Romantic fashion, offered Indian wisdom as the answer to the West’s problems – a key theme in the anti-colonial discourse of Hindus. The neo-Hindu discourse makes ample use of the Orientalist and Romantic themes of the Vedas as the seat of universal spiritual wisdom and the Vedic age as India’s glorious past. Simultaneously, it strongly criticizes colonial might by showing its apparent lack in the spiritual field. Thus, Hindu reformers of the 19th century came to see India as spiritual in opposition to the “materialistic” West (Chatterjee 1993). Counter-enlightenment themes of anti-rationality and pointing to the dark side of technological progress were key tropes adapted with enthusiasm by Hindu reformers. Even though spirituality is a modern Western concept used to refer to the appropriated and abstracted essence of Hinduism, its enthusiastic reappropriation by Hindu leaders has greatly contributed to the discourse of Indian spirituality.

⁶⁸ The centrality of the Vedanta also allowed Christian missionaries to engage with Hindus in theological debates. For the Christian missionary influence on the construction of Hinduism see King (1999a, 132) and Oddie (2006).

⁶⁹ Amongst my interlocutors, interest in the Vedas was both textual and post-textual. Most had read something or the other *on* the Vedas, very few had read them in Sanskrit or through full translations. But allusion to the Vedas is commonplace, serving as a metatropes for the ancientness of India’s scriptures. It is in this sense that they are post-textual as in beyond the actual text of the Vedas, mediated through their symbolic proliferation in other texts and oral discourses. The Vedas, therefore, invoke piety even where people may not have thoroughly read it.

Within this discourse, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) is a key figure⁷⁰. Born Narendranath Dutta in Calcutta, he became one of the most prominent voices asserting India's spiritual superiority over the rest of the world. He was also the first Hindu guru to make an appearance on the global stage. In 1893, he attended the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago which is today, "touted as a significant event in U.S. religious history, and upheld as an early example of multifaith engagements, especially between the Christian West and the non-Christian East" (Iwamura 2011, 10). Although over the course of the 17-day conference, 152 of 194 papers were delivered by Christians, the Conference did also see the presence of Eastern religions including Hinduism and Buddhism. Vivekananda's speech at the Parliament is a decisive moment in the history of Indian spirituality where with great rhetorical force, he presents India, the homeland of Hinduism, as the world's spiritual guru. He referred to Hinduism as "the mother of religions [...] a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance"⁷¹. Vivekananda's modern Hindu spirituality relied on the Vedanta, particularly influenced by Sankara's Advaita, to appeal to a Western as well as a reformist middle-class Indian audience. The speech at the 1893 Parliament, thus, launched at an international forum the claims of Hinduism as, "a form of spirituality that was far superior to the parochial teachings of Christianity, which was closely allied to colonialism and secular materialism. Hinduism thus became simultaneously a national religion, the basis of religious nationalism, and a universal spirituality" (van der Veer 2014, 89).

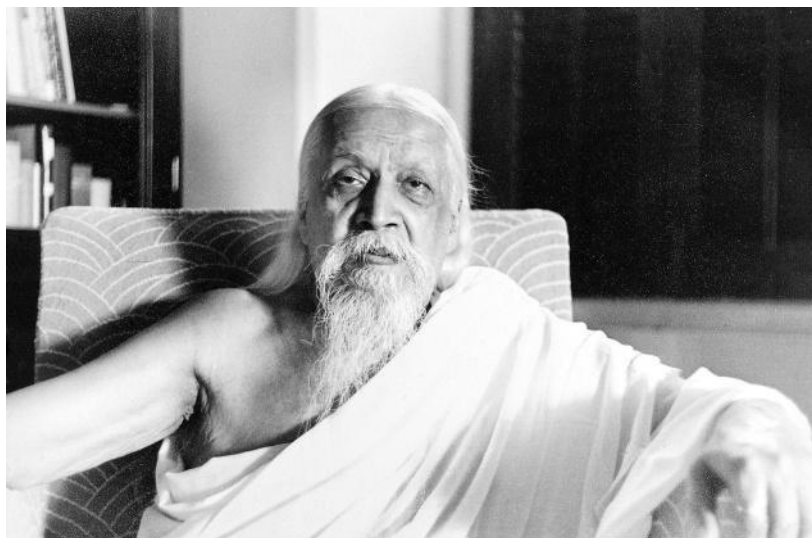
Vivekananda's secularised, that is, non-theistic version of Hinduism founded on neo-Vedantic ideology promoted Hinduism as a universal religion. The "spiritual India vs. materialistic West" trope was fortified by Vivekananda as can be seen in his letter home from the United States in which he writes, "As regards spirituality, the Americans are far inferior to us, but their society is far superior to ours. We will teach them our spirituality and assimilate what is best in their society" (Vivekananda quoted in King 1978, 70). "In Vivekananda's hands, Orientalist notions of India as 'other worldly' and 'mystical' were embraced and praised as India's special gift to humankind. Thus the very discourse that succeeded in alienating, subordinating and controlling India was used by Vivekananda as a religious clarion call for the Indian people to unite under the banner of a

⁷⁰ Vivekananda's religious universalism was highly influenced by his membership of the Brahmo Samaj which was founded by the Hindu reformer Rammohan Roy in 1828. The Samaj rejected several Hindu customs as "superstitious", replacing it with the "rationality" of the Vedanta. Vivekananda combined this rationalist approach with popular Bengali devotionism in his spiritual teachings (see de Michelis 2004; and van der Veer 2014). Also see Chapter 3 for the post-1965 gurus who continue to preach neo-Vedantism in their guru discourse.

⁷¹ His speech at the World Parliament of Religions <http://www.viveksamity.org/user/doc/CHICAGO-SPEECH.pdf>

universalistic and all-embracing Hinduism” (King 1999a, 93). Vivekananda’s ideas inspired many, as it continues to do, and among the people whom Vivekananda inspired was Sri Aurobindo, another important figure in the reappropriated nationalist formulation of India as inherently spiritual. But, as Gleig and Flores (2013) note, Sri Aurobindo’s central role in the development of modern Hinduism has been often overlooked. His spiritual teachings also seem to have overshadowed his earlier political life. As his biographer Peter Heehs (2006) notes, “His (Sri Aurobindo’s) survival in popular memory presumably owes more to his reputation as a yogi and philosopher than an awareness of his political thought and action” (151). In the following section, I focus on Sri Aurobindo’s political thought with particular emphasis on nationalistic spirituality.

Sri Aurobindo and Indian spirituality



Sri Aurobindo Ghose

(Image courtesy: Auroville ‘Sri Aurobindo: His Vision Made Auroville Possible’

<http://www.auroville.org/contents/531>)

Sri Aurobindo was born Aurobindo Ackroyd Ghose in Kolkata, India, on 15 August 1872. His father, Krishna Dhun Ghose, was an Anglophone doctor who had received the degree of M.D. from King’s College in England and had high ambitions for Aurobindo. He wanted his son, Aurobindo, to enter the ranks of the prestigious Covenanted Civil Service of India or ICS. The qualifying exam was extremely tough and only those thoroughly proficient in the English school curriculum could pass it. Krishna Dhun Ghose sailed to England in 1879 with his family where his sons, including Sri Aurobindo, were to remain to be educated in the English education system. Sri Aurobindo was only 7 at the time.

Brought up by an English clergyman, William H. Drewett and his family, Sri Aurobindo and his brothers “grew up English” (Heehs 2008, 13). They spoke only English, learnt Latin and English poetry at school, and grew up in a Christian religio-moral atmosphere, although their father had asked Drewett that the boys not be given any religious training. It was only much later when he started attending King’s College in Cambridge, having secured a university scholarship, that Sri Aurobindo began his acquaintance with India. There, along with Latin and Greek, he learnt Sanskrit, Bengali (his “native” tongue), and read English translations of Max Muller’s renderings of the Upanisads. In the 14 years of his life in England, Sri Aurobindo intensely disliked England and the English. By the time he joined Cambridge, Sri Aurobindo had also become acutely aware of the political situation of India, and, “by the time he left school he had made a ‘firm decision’ to work for India’s liberation” (Heehs 2008, 17).

Sri Aurobindo returned to India in 1893 at the age of 21. He worked in various administrative positions in the kingdom of Baroda, an erstwhile princely state which is now in the state of Gujarat, where he also taught English in the college. While in Baroda, between 1893-1906, he tried to improve his Bengali, voraciously read Sanskrit epics and became interested in Hinduism, particularly the Vedas, and spent as much time in Bengal as his work permitted in order to participate in revolutionary political groups concerned with India’s liberation. He started writing essays and articles on his political views at this time. Sri Aurobindo wanted radical political change, that is, the complete overthrow of the British Raj, something that few Indian nationalists at the time wanted. In between his administrative and teaching jobs in Baroda as well as the intense reading and his political activities, he had started practising yoga. As a young boy in England, not only was Sri Aurobindo not inspired by Christianity, but rather, as he wrote later, he found the Calvinist ideas of eternal damnation very off-putting (Heehs 2008, 14). However, he held the Vedas and Upanisads to be repositories of profound spiritual knowledge (Heehs 2008).

Simultaneously, from 1902-1910, his political activities intensified, especially after he moved to Kolkata in 1906 after resigning from his position in Baroda, and went on to become the editor of the English language anti-colonial newspaper, *Bande Mataram* (Victory to the Motherland). At the same time, following from his Baroda days, he believed that self-knowledge for higher spiritual goals and attaining political freedom were compatible endeavours. His spiritual interest in the Vedas coupled with his nationalist politics is an important development in his life, for he would combine the anti-colonial stance with the discourse of pride in India’s ancient spiritual heritage. Sri Aurobindo (1997a) emphasised the inherently spiritual nature of India, “India’s central conception is that of the Eternal [...] It is her founding of life upon this exalted conception and her urge

towards the spiritual and the eternal that constitute the distinct value of her civilisation” (56-57). India, with the conception of the ‘Eternal’, was opposed in his discourse to European culture which he saw as, “predominantly material [...] predominantly mental and intellectual like the old Graeco-Roman” culture (ibid, 56).

Interestingly, he uses this formulation of Europe as fixated with the intellect to critique Mueller, almost a decade after reading the latter’s translation of the Upanisads. Mueller had castigated the “sacred books of the East” for containing the sublime truth along with much that he held to be “hideous and repellent” (Mueller cited in Heehs 2008, 177). In a satirical tone, Sri Aurobindo wrote, “Everything is unmeaning in the Upanishads which the Europeans cannot understand, everything is artificial which does not come within the circle of their mental experience and everything is silly which is not explicable by European sciences and wisdom” (Sri Aurobindo cited in Heehs ibid). Thus, faced with colonial political subjugation, anti-colonial nationalists like Sri Aurobindo made, “the strategic choices of essentialism” (Spivak 1990, 187) where, instead of negating colonial stereotypes about India’s inherent spirituality and Europe’s technological superiority, he transformed the same discourse by turning it on its head. Arguably, such reversals did nothing or little to counter the essentialist substance of the formulaic presumptions, focussed as they were on their implications instead of the content.

However, even as he glorified the ancient Vedic knowledge, Sri Aurobindo was also critical of the outlook that India had nothing to offer in terms of material progress. He attributed this view of Indians as nothing but spiritual chiefly to European stereotyping. Sri Aurobindo (1997a) wrote:

European writers, struck by the general metaphysical bent of the Indian mind, by its strong religious instincts and religious idealism, by its otherworldliness, are inclined to write as if this were all the Indian spirit. An abstract, metaphysical, religious mind overpowered by the sense of the infinite, not apt for life, dreamy, unpractical, turning away from life and actions as Maya, this, they said, is India (5-6).

Sri Aurobindo rued that Indians had submitted to the Europeans in attributing an other-worldly attitude to themselves while foregoing true comprehension of India’s astounding power and capabilities. He emphatically argued that although, “spirituality is indeed the master-key of the Indian mind; the sense of the infinite is native to it” (ibid, 6), nevertheless, this flourished along with great achievements in the spheres of, “laws and codes and rituals, physical sciences, psychic sciences, systems of Yoga, systems of politics and administration, arts spiritual, arts worldly, trades, industries, fine crafts” (ibid, 8). In fact, he argued that great vitality – by which he meant abundance of energy directed toward activities or enterprises like creating sculptures or building empires - and

intellectuality were totally entwined with a highly developed spiritual consciousness in India, and that one could not have flourished without the other. But he lamented that the spiritual, intellectual, and vital prowess of India had declined and it was precisely its dissipation in the present times that had enabled Europe to establish control over India. For Sri Aurobindo, the spiritual and the vital prowess of India were interlinked and rejuvenating one was to immediately rejuvenate the other.

Given Sri Aurobindo's political activities connected with the newspaper, *Bande Mataram*, the British government charged him with sedition and he was sentenced to prison term in May 1908 where he would spend a year in captivity. Sri Aurobindo was sent to Alipore Jail in Calcutta (now Kolkata) where, he said, he had many spiritual experiences in his solitary cell that confirmed to him the significance of his yogic *sadhana*. Released about a year later, Sri Aurobindo was under strict scrutiny of the police, which continued when in 1910, Sri Aurobindo and some fellow nationalists decided to move to Pondicherry. As a place under French rule, it would offer political sanctuary to Sri Aurobindo who was being persecuted by the British. Sri Aurobindo had also become more and more involved in his *sadhana* and he intended to spend his exilic time in Pondicherry in solitude to concentrate on yoga. What had begun as a plan to spend only a few months or a year in exile in Pondicherry eventually turned into a lifelong project of doing yoga in Pondicherry and the subsequent establishment of Sri Aurobindo *ashram*. Once in Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo retired from politics completely and decided to focus solely on his *sadhana*. Retrospectively, Sri Aurobindo spoke of his move to Pondicherry and withdrawal from politics as based on an inner *adesh* (command) which guided him toward absolute concentration on his *sadhana* (Heehs 2008, 209). It was in Pondicherry, in the course of his *sadhana* (spiritual practice), that Sri Aurobindo met Mirra Alfassa (later Richard), the topic of our next section.

Even though Sri Aurobindo began distancing himself from nationalist politics, his vision of a spiritually evolved world – discussed below as part of his yogic teachings - envisaged a special role for India. Srinivas Aravamudan (2006) argues that for Sri Aurobindo, “India would be the laboratory, sacred territory, and launching pad for this planetary rejuvenation” (96). In Sri Aurobindo's philosophy, the divinisation of the world required a, “rediscovery of the spiritual [...] through a return to Indian mystical sources” (ibid). Drawing on the Vedantic concept of realising the *brahman*, he claimed a common ground in personal experience, therefore successfully universalising neo-Vedantic teachings. This is evident in *The Life Divine* (2005) where Sri Aurobindo argued that, “if we can extend our faculty of mental self-awareness to awareness of the Self beyond and outside us, Atman or *Brahman* of the Upanishads, we may become possessors in experience of the truths which form the contents of the Atman or *Brahman* in the universe. It is on

this possibility that Indian Vedanta has based itself” (71). Further, he argued that Indian Vedanta held reason to be inferior to “intuition and spiritual experience” (ibid, 75)⁷². Where reason divides the integral whole into parts so as to analyse them, intuition grasps the whole as it is. Thus, Sri Aurobindo proposed a return to, “that true Self, Divinity or Reality declared by the Vedanta [...] the questions speculative and practical which have always occupied the thought of India” (ibid, 77).

Below, I shall take up in more detail Sri Aurobindo’s yogic teachings. However, let us note here the central characteristic of Sri Aurobindo’s spirituality - it is both, nationalistic in its insistence on the superiority of Upanisadic teachings and universal in its reliance on experience or realisation of the cosmic principle called *brahman*. The nationalist-universalist paradox is not unique to Sri Aurobindo as we already saw in the case of Vivekananda. As with Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo’s writings too, when placed in the historical context of anticolonial nationalism and the Orientalist interest in Vedanta, demonstrate a strategic inversion of colonial stereotypes through appropriation of Romantic ideals of anti-rationality and glorification of the premodern past. As Aravamudan (2006) writes, “Indian Romanticism can be allowed to take its rightful place alongside all the other products of modernity that ceaselessly invented a cultural tradition in the place of the multiple practices they erased” (103). And yet, it was a French woman, known in the occult circles of Paris, who emerged as Sri Aurobindo’s “spiritual collaborator” in his *ashram* in French-ruled Pondicherry. This collaboration – between a native brought up in England, subsequently nationalist turned yogi, whose first acquaintance with the Upanisads is through Orientalist interpretive translation, and a French woman dabbling in Western esotericism looking Eastward for universal spiritual truth - is perhaps, in a nutshell, the best example of the many complexities and paradoxes of a universalist Indian spirituality.

Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual collaborator and their teachings

Blanche Rachel Mirra Alfassa was born on 21 February 1878 in Paris to a Turkish father and Egyptian mother, both of Jewish descent. Her father was a successful businessman and her mother was a highly educated and independent woman (Jayawardena 1995). Alfassa professed to be a materialist that is, “she believed in only what she could see and touch” but nevertheless, she claimed to have several paranormal experiences from a very young age (Pillai 2005, 274). She went to the Ecole de Beaux Arts and kept the company of several painters such as Monet, Degas, Renoir et al (Jayawardena 1995). In 1897 she married the painter Henri Morisset and had a son with him.

⁷² Recall that “intuition” was a significant Romantic trope echoed in German Idealists’ such as Schlegel’s philosophy as well as in the writings of American Transcendentalists such as Emerson.



The Mother

(Image courtesy: http://www.sriaurobindoashram.org/ashram/mother/sriauro_on.php)

At the same time as she was a part of the Parisian Bohemia, she also yearned to find out more about her personal paranormal experiences. Alfassa began developing her interest in spiritualism. Her brother told her about an occult group called the *Mouvement Cosmique* with its headquarters in Tlemcen, Algeria. Alfassa went to the group's headquarters for 3 months in 1906 but for the most part she participated in the group's activities by meeting other members in Paris and editing the group's journal, *La revue Cosmique* which was published in Paris (Heehs 2008, 251-253). Alfassa became well acquainted with Max Theon (1848-1927) and his wife Mary Christine Woodroffe Ware (1843-1908), founders of the group and occultists.

Before moving on to biographical details of the *Mouvement Cosmique*'s founders, I should note here that several esoteric groups had emerged in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries (Owen 2004; Pillai 2005)⁷³. The spiritualists challenged the hegemony of religion, and proposed that there was an alternative plane, the dimension of spirits and other non-human entities, which could be contacted. For instance, the Theosophical Society in the United States founded by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky

⁷³ In her account of the rise of occultism in Europe in late 19th and early to mid-20th centuries, Owen (2004) argues that occultism became popular at this time since it offered a channel of grappling with "fin de siècle modernity". Placing the construction of modern selfhood at the centre of her study, she posits that occultism held appeal at this time because it provided new "sources of the self" in terms of intuition, experience and imagination which were also being explored in psychology and philosophy by the likes of William James, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Thus, according to Owen (2004), the rise of occultism can be explained in terms of the rise of the modern notion of the self as a subject with the paradigmatic goal "to know oneself" (257).

and Henry Steel Olcott in 1875⁷⁴, “combined radical anti-church attitudes, anti-establishment socialism, and freethinking with spiritual experimentation” (van der Veer 2014, 37). Blavatsky (1831-1891) was of Russian origin (born in what is now Ukraine), relocated to the United States in 1873, and, “claimed to have travelled to esoteric locations from Egypt to Tibet and conversed with spiritual masters belonging to a number of different traditions. Blavatsky suggested that non-European civilizations such as those of India, China, Egypt and the Aztecs were far more spiritually evolved than their European equivalents” (Aravamudan 2006, 106).

Blavatsky made ubiquitous references to the so-called mystical traditions of Buddhism as well as Hinduism. In the manner of the familiar equation of Hinduism with mysticism, she “portrayed Hinduism as a mystical religion that encouraged people to turn inwards and find the divine within themselves” and “made India the centre for the natural magic which occultists traditionally associated with their cosmological schemes” (Bevir cited in de Michelis 2004, 162). The search for the other world and spiritualist truth specifically in the occult sense of seeking spirits and ghosts as in the case of the Theosophists was seen as, “secular truth seeking [...] opposed to religious obscurantism and hierarchy...Perhaps the most important element in the emergence of spirituality was that it offered an alternative to institutionalized religion (van der Veer 2014, 38). It is noteworthy that Max Theon of Mouvement Cosmique, the occultist group which Mirra Alfassa participated in from 1904 to 1908 (Heehs 2011, 221), may likely have been an influence on Blavatsky in the 1870s when she was in Egypt where Theon was active in occult circles (Johnson 1994, 5; see also Jayawardena 1995, 208) and founded an occult society in England called the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor before starting the Mouvement Cosmique in Algeria.

Theon was a Polish Jew and while he neither denied his origins nor went out of his way to stress it, he and his wife acknowledged that their teachings were influenced “above all from the oral Chaldean tradition” (cited in Heehs 2011, 229). Heehs (ibid) explains that the term Chaldean was used to refer to Semitic people who had settled in Babylonia in ancient times. Heehs also states that the reference to Chaldean tradition was an indirect way of acknowledging the influence of the kabbalah, the “texts and practices of esoteric Jewish mysticism” (ibid, 230). Given Alfassa’s Jewish roots, her participation in the society strengthened her spiritualist interest in the kabbalah. Further, her engagement with occultism must be understood within this historical development of spirituality as anti-church and simultaneously as rational truth seeking which accorded well with her

⁷⁴ Subsequently the headquarters of the Theosophical Society was shifted from New York to Madras, India in 1882.

materialist beliefs. Later in this section, I will look at the ways in which her occultist interests feature in the teachings of Integral Yoga.

In 1908, Alfassa and her husband divorced, even as she continued to be active in the occult circles. Subsequently, in 1911, she married a French lawyer and journalist Paul Richard with whom she travelled to Pondicherry in 1914. Richard went to Pondicherry to contest the seat of the deputy for French India (Heehs 2008, 255). However, he was also interested in spirituality and on a previous visit to Pondicherry in 1910 he had met Sri Aurobindo whom he greatly respected. This time, his wife accompanied him to meet Sri Aurobindo. She was profoundly moved by her meeting with Sri Aurobindo and later described that at her very first sight of the latter, she understood that he was the same “being of light” which she had seen in her visions (Nahar 1997 cited in Pillai 2005, 277). Despite her devotion to Sri Aurobindo, she could not continue to stay in Pondicherry once the first world war broke out. She and Paul returned to France and then lived in Japan for a few years. Finally, in 1920 both returned to Pondicherry. Shortly, thereafter they divorced following which Paul returned to France while Mirra remained behind in Pondicherry fulfilling the role of Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual partner and eventually came to be entrusted all matters related to the *ashram*⁷⁵.

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were prolific writers, and taken together, their corpus of writings form the basis of a discipline of yoga which they founded and called Integral Yoga. Sri Aurobindo’s personal spiritual experiences were influential in the development of Integral Yoga. In 1908 he met a yogi, Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, who instructed Sri Aurobindo on how to silence his mind. Quite unexpectedly, Sri Aurobindo is said to have experienced communion with the Vedantic impersonal principle of *brahman* (Heehs 2008, 142-44). *Brahman* refers to, “a transcendent entity who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent” (Pillai 2005, 122). Sri Aurobindo’s experience of the *brahman* convinced him that there was a higher plane of existence which created all life forms and yet was beyond such creation. While asserting that his philosophy “was formed first by the study of the Upanishads and the Gita”, he also insisted that his personal experiences accompanied by “knowledge that flowed from above when I sat in meditation” formed the primary source of his philosophical insight (Sri Aurobindo cited in Heehs 2011, 220). There is no contradiction in drawing on personal experiences as well as scriptures since the Vedantic texts, as we have seen in

⁷⁵ As Shanti Pillai (2005, 280-81) notes, there is nothing in archival documents or according to long-term *ashramites* that suggests that the relationship between Sri Aurobindo and the Mother was of conjugal nature.

the previous sections, had come to be regarded as consisting of deep spiritual truth which could be experienced by anyone.

“Vedanta describes *Brahman* as ‘Sachchidananda’, meaning that which possesses three attributes: Sat (Absolute Existence), Chit-Tapas (Absolute Consciousness and Energy/Force), and Ananda (Absolute Bliss)” (Pillai 2005, 123). Sri Aurobindo stated that all creation was a manifestation of Sachchidananda. In one of his most significant treatises *The Life Divine* (2005), he wrote:

This becoming of the infinite Bliss-Existence-Consciousness in mind and life and body, — for independent of them it exists eternally, — is the transfiguration intended and the utility of individual existence. Through the individual it manifests in relation even as of itself it exists in identity [...] Sachchidananda is the unknown, omnipresent, indispensable term for which the human consciousness, whether in knowledge and sentiment or in sensation and action, is eternally seeking (48-49).

Even though Sri Aurobindo wrote that human consciousness seeks realisation of the *brahman*, he rejected the Advaita (non-dualism) Vedanta of Saṅkara which saw the world as an illusion or *maya*, and in this regard his teachings proved to be a departure from the usual Romantic Orientalist emphasis on Saṅkara’s Advaita (as seen, for instance, in Schopenhauer’s borrowing of the concept of *maya*). According to *mayavada*, man must realise the illusory nature of this life to seek communion with *brahman*. But Sri Aurobindo believed that this world was not illusory since *brahman* was manifest in all matter. He sought to reconcile the principle of *brahman*, absolute transcendence, with matter, that is, transient immanence, “through the utilization of an involution–evolution or a descent–ascent narrative” (Gleig 2012, 42). In this, his teachings represent a modern form of yoga which combines Vedanta with Western thought including the biological model of evolution. “Involution refers to the descent of spirit into nature and the progressive emergence of ‘matter, life and mind’, and evolution signifies the reascent of the latter to their spiritual origin, a process that results in a spiritualization of matter and ‘the divine life’. This reascent is not a return to an original state but the unfolding of a fundamentally new manifestation of *Brahman* as divinized matter” (ibid).

Between the higher realm of the *brahman* and the lower realm of matter, Sri Aurobindo posited that there was another plane – the plane of consciousness called the Supermind which recognised the unity of spirit and nature, and man and divinity. He describes it as, “divine Truth-Consciousness as the ancient mystics called it, a Supermind, a Gnosis, with which this world of a lesser consciousness proceeding by Ignorance is in secret relation and which alone maintains it and prevents it from falling into a disintegrated chaos” (1999, 254). According to him, “Starting with the early stages in evolution, namely inert matter and plants, and moving upwards towards animals, human beings and

eventually the Supermind, *Brahman* reveals more and more of its complexity. In other words, each evolutionary level expresses more fully the attributes of Sat, Chit-Tapas and Ananda” (Pillai 2005, 124). There are several stages, according to Sri Aurobindo, for the human being to traverse in the evolutionary scheme which exemplify higher and higher stages of consciousness – “the Higher mind, Illumined mind, Intuitive mind, Overmind” and finally the Supermind. Despite calling these stages “mind”, Sri Aurobindo’s use of the word mind is to be distinguished from reason. Rather, in Sri Aurobindo’s usage, mind refers to stages of consciousness which move beyond reason to higher levels of awareness until finally at the stage of the Supermind, a supramental, that is, beyond-intellectual, consciousness is achieved. Human beings are the creatures who can and must aspire to this higher Supramental consciousness in the spiritual ascent toward the divine (*brahman*)⁷⁶.

Essential to the process of human beings’ spiritual evolution is the soul or the “psychic being”, a term that Sri Aurobindo borrows from the Mother (Gleig 2012, 43) which has clear imprints of the occult tradition. As we shall see in Chapter 4 in the section on *karma* and rebirth, Madame Blavatsky conceptualises the soul as progressing from one lifetime to the next. In a similar fashion, the Mother (2003) defines the psychic being as that, “which persists after death, because it is your eternal self; it is this that carries the consciousness forward from life to life” (63), echoing the philosophy of the Movement Cosmique in which the word “psychic” is related to the “soul” which is considered to be the “organ of the emotive and affective sentiments” (Heehs 2011, 237) and seen to play a very important role in a person’s evolution in future lifetimes.

As Heehs (ibid) notes, there is no equivalent of the psychic being in the Vedanta and undoubtedly, Sri Aurobindo was influenced by the Mother in his use of the term. In *The Life Divine* (2005), he in fact makes reference to occultism when he writes:

Even the ensoulment of the body by the psychic being follows, if the occult view of these things is correct, a similar outward process, for the soul as nucleus draws to itself for birth and aggregates the elements of its mental, vital and physical sheaths and their contents, increases these formations in life, and in its departing drops and disaggregates again these aggregates, drawing back into itself its inner powers, till in rebirth it repeats the original process (198 fn4).

It would be overstating the case to contend that occultism was a formative influence on his teachings, for it was foremost neo-Vedanta which underscored his teachings. However, his collaboration with the Mother is certainly notable in his use of the concept “psychic being” and represents yet another instance of cross-cultural influence in the formation of Indian spirituality. For

⁷⁶ The word “Divine” is often used by Sri Aurobindo in his texts which is used interchangeably with *brahman*.

Sri Aurobindo, “The psychic being evolves beyond the human to the supermind or supramental consciousness, which will result in the emergence of a spiritualized species and a ‘divine life’ on earth” (Gleig 2012, 43). It was precisely this – the spiritualisation of life in this world through aspiration toward and striving for realisation of the divine – that is the task of Integral Yoga. Thus, Sri Aurobindo explains in *The Synthesis of Yoga* (1999):

An Integral Yoga includes as a vital and indispensable element in its total and ultimate aim the conversion of the whole being into a higher spiritual consciousness and a larger divine existence. Our parts of will and action, our parts of knowledge, our thinking being, our emotional being, our being of life, all our self and nature must seek the Divine, enter into the Infinite, unite with the Eternal (279).

It is this vision of a united endeavour toward divinising this world - in keeping with his theory of spiritual evolution - instead of renouncing it that guides Integral Yoga and the practice of *ashramites*. In accordance with Sri Aurobindo’s motto, “All life is yoga”, *ashramites* are meant to do everything in the spirit of surrendering to the divine and incorporating the divine consciousness in their everyday life. *Karma* yoga, that is, the yoga of works, is an important element of Integral Yoga whereby *ashramites* and volunteers are meant to willingly work in one or the other *ashram* work unit (for example, the school, the dining hall, the gardens, and so on) in the spirit of offering their services to the divine. As many of my interlocutors said, to them their work was a form of meditation. In Chapter 4, I shall discuss surrendering and *karma* yoga in more detail, demonstrating how surrendering forms a crucial way for my interlocutors of recreating their selves as connected to something bigger than their individual self. In the chapter after that, I continue the theme of relationality to demonstrate that despite rather essentialist critiques of India’s contemporary everyday life and local customs, Sri Aurobindo’s and Mother’s futuristic theory of the world’s spiritual transformation does afford the possibilities of envisaging an integrated world where all human beings find their true calling of realising the divine. In both these chapters, following from the discussion of the Integral Yoga teachings here, I show how the teachings are interpreted and applied in my interlocutors’ narratives and practices.

I must also note here that the evolutionary perspective of Integral Yoga formed the Mother’s dream project of building a “global city” which would be “place that no nation could claim as its sole property, a place where all human beings of good will, sincere in their aspiration, could live freely as citizens of the world, obeying one single authority, that of the supreme Truth” (Auroville 2010, 2). This “dream” eventually materialised in the inauguration by the Mother of the township called Auroville, 12 kilometres from Pondicherry, on 28 February 1968. The Mother’s vision for Auroville was that of a global city where people of various nationalities would live in harmony and

practise the principles of Integral Yoga. And the population of Auroville indeed consists of various nationals including Indians, French, German, Americans and English among others (see Jouhki 2006, 14). From about 150 members in 1968, today there are more than 2000 residents (Auroville 2016⁷⁷). Whereas the *ashram* was more focused on the personal *sadhana* of individuals, Auroville was supposed to be a more active “outward” manifestation of the inner practice leading to a more spiritually developed world. Although the Mother’s utopian vision had existed since long, its material realisation in the form of Auroville’s inauguration coincided with the 1960s counter-cultural discourse of global harmony and peace. Thus, Auroville was “promoted as an experiment experiment as well as a shelter for those looking to escape the modern realities of the Cold War, of widening economic inequalities, and polarizing political ideologies” (Namakkal 2012, 65)⁷⁸.

Some of my interlocutors travelled to India precisely in search of Auroville in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For instance, a German man now in his 70s, Gunther, travelled overland to India in 1973 because he wanted to go to Auroville. Another of my interlocutors, a French man travelled to India in 1969. Shortly thereafter, his brother travelled overland to Auroville and both of them lived in a residential quarter called Aspiration in Auroville. What was meant to be a temporary stay turned out to be a permanent one for both – although neither of them lives in Auroville now, they have been *ashramites* for more than 40 years and live in the *ashram* provided accommodation in Pondicherry. I did visit Auroville a few times during my fieldwork. However, I decided against dividing my time between Pondicherry and Auroville, concentrating instead on establishing a rapport with my interlocutors in Pondicherry. In the rest of thesis, thus, I shall continue to focus on the lives of my interlocutors in Pondicherry.

The development of the *ashram* and the “spirituality versus religion” question

By 1920, a small community of 8-10 disciples had arisen around Sri Aurobindo, all of whom including the Mother were called *sadhaks* (spiritual practitioners) and who stayed in the same house on rue Francois Martin. Subsequently Sri Aurobindo entrusted the management of the household to the Mother. By 1923, the number of *sadhaks* had increased to 15 and it became necessary to buy another house in addition to the one on Francois Martin Street.

⁷⁷ <http://www.auroville.org/contents/95>

⁷⁸ However, as several studies have pointed out, there are deep rifts between the utopian vision of Auroville and its realisation, not least because of the relations between the Western Aurovillians and Tamil non-Aurovillians from the neighbouring villages as well as Aurovillians (Jouhki 2006; Minor 1999; Namakkal 2012).

In 1926, Sri Aurobindo declared that he was retiring from active life – not only was this his final declaration of self-exile from the nationalist political life but it was also the commencement of his withdrawal from public life as such when he would not be meeting disciples and other *sadhaks* frequently. All tasks related to managing the community and the welfare of the *sadhaks* were entrusted to the Mother by Sri Aurobindo. In doing so, he made it clear that he considered Mother his equal and that all *sadhaks* who looked up to him as their guru must also treat the Mother as their guru (Minor 1987, 87; Heehs 2008).

The year 1926 is often mentioned as the year of the foundation of the *ashram*. However, the community of *sadhaks* that had sprung up was not yet called an *ashram*. Sri Aurobindo, in fact, thought the word “*ashram*” was quite unsuitable to describe what he considered to be, “a free assemblage of men and women who lived in his two houses and did yoga under his and Mirra’s guidance” (Heehs 2008, 340). Sri Aurobindo disliked the connotations of asceticism and renunciation associated with the word ‘*ashram*’ since his yoga purported to be about active spiritual work in this world without renouncing it. Despite his misgivings about the term, the community did come to be referred to as an *ashram*. A 1927 article published in the newspaper *The Hindu*, written by Jatindranath Sen Gupta, a friend of one of the community members, is titled *Sri Aurobindo’s Ashram: Daily Life of Inmates*. The article sought to give glimpses into the lives and spiritual practices of the community members. The last paragraph of the article was written by Sri Aurobindo where he himself refers to the community as an *ashram* (Heehs 2008, 359).

Under the guidance of the Mother, the *ashram* became self-sufficient, running its own farms and industries. The Mother was instrumental in creating an atmosphere of, “organization, efficiency and hygiene that were unheard of in India at that time and which drew the admiration of many Indians, whether they believed in her divinity or not” (Pillai 2005, 281). Her goal was to set up a fully functional community where members would have no need to bother about anything apart from their spiritual practice. The Mother explained her early desire to found a safe haven for spiritual seekers:

I was very young at that time, and always I used to tell myself that if ever I could do it, I would try to create a little world - Oh! quite a small one, but still - a small world where people would be able to live without having to be preoccupied by problems of food and lodging and clothing and the imperious necessities of life, to see if all the energies freed by this certainty of an assured material living would spontaneously be turned to the divine life and inner realisation (the Mother cited in Minor 1987, 86).

It was in keeping with this vision that the Mother set up the *ashram* school, the common dining hall and several other work centres for the benefit of its members. Today the *ashram* runs several guest

houses in the city where devotees and tourists (usually tourists who have some inclination toward the Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's teachings) can stay. Those who stay in the *ashram* guest houses can have their meals in the common *ashram* dining hall. Apart from the guest houses and the dining hall, the *ashram* runs its own school, nursing home, library, archives, dispensary, bakery, printing press, exhibition halls, playground, and grocery stores.

The Mother continued to be active in *ashram* life even after the death of Sri Aurobindo in 1950, and was held in high esteem by disciples until her own death in 1973. She provides an interesting example of the East/West confluence of the time. Certainly, a product of her times, the Mother heralded India as the mystic East, and her true home. While such appreciation was simultaneously a Romantic appropriation, the Mother also went beyond her cultural boundaries to craft what she believed was the true, universal future of the human population.

Both Sri Aurobindo and Mother insisted that Integral Yoga is not religion. Sri Aurobindo believed that the true essence of all religions is experience which is beyond narrow logic and reason (Minor 1987; Heehs 2008). He asserted that doctrines, creed and ecclesiastical hierarchy confound instead of revealing the innermost truth which is available to all humans through their psychic being. Thus, in *The Human Cycle*, Sri Aurobindo (1997b) distinguishes "true religion" from "religionism" arguing that the former is "spiritual religion, that which seeks to live in the spirit, in what is beyond the intellect" while the latter is entrenched in narrow dogmas, "forms and ceremonies, on some fixed and rigid moral code, on some religio-political or religio-social system" (177-78). However, he does mention that forms and ceremonies may be needed by people before they can be fully spiritualised. The synonymising of true religion with the esoteric and the rejection of exoteric practices as well as institutions, as discussed in the previous chapter, is a common theme in the development of spirituality and in its posited opposition to religion. Insofar as Sri Aurobindo and the Mother both distanced their teachings from established religions claiming that the latter only lay importance on the mind instead of the soul, their teachings appealed to my interlocutors who broke away from Christianity on similar grounds – that the church was hierarchical and that true esoteric knowledge had been sacrificed to the shallow externalities of dogma and doctrines. One of my interlocutors, an American woman who is member of the Sri Aurobindo Centre in Lodi, California, told me that when she first started reading texts by Sri Aurobindo, she was impressed by the fact that he had not mentioned the word "god". Instead, he wrote of the divine as a transcendent principle. She mentioned that had he used the word god, she would have probably not gone on to read him since that would seem too close to the church's discourse on god.

Following from the assertion that his teachings were not meant to give rise to religious dogmatism, Sri Aurobindo clarifies that, “The Asram (sic) is not a religious association. Those who are here come from all religions and some are of no religion. There is no creed or set of dogmas, no governing religious body.” (Sri Aurobindo cited in Heehs 2015, 70). Yet, given the *ashram* is an extremely well run organisation, it is inevitable that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother as well as their teachings have become institutionalised instead of remaining at the level of a few individuals doing their own individual *sadhana*. In fact, without such institutionalisation, the *ashram* could not possibly exist today. In case of many other *ashrams*, the guru appoints a successor to take over the spiritual leadership after the former’s death. But as mentioned before, there are no spiritual successors of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and they continue to be regarded as the guiding light of this spiritual community. Their photographs are present everywhere in the *ashram* buildings, quotes and excerpt s from their texts are displayed in several places such as outside the *samadhi* and the common dining hall, followers regularly go to the *samadhi* to pay their respects, and certain days are designated as *darshan* days when devotees are allowed to enter Sri Aurobindo’s and Mother’s room to be in the presence of their sacred aura. Further, Sri Aurobindo and Mother are regarded by their devotees (although not everyone I met subscribes to this view) as *avatara*, that is, divine reincarnations in human form. In the *ashram*, the words attributed to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother take on sacred dimensions and they are often quoted as if they are the last authority on a particular matter. In such a scenario insistence on the strict separation of spirituality from religion on the grounds that the latter is dogmatic becomes particularly difficult to maintain, evident in the tensions that surfaced in the life of the *ashram* following the publication of Peter Heehs’ biography of Sri Aurobindo, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, in 2008.

Heehs is an American *ashramite* who has been living in the *ashram* for over 40 years now. He is also an independent historian who has written extensively on Sri Aurobindo and I have cited him several times in this thesis⁷⁹. Heehs’ biography was well received in the academic community, and I have found it to be an exhaustive and well-rounded text on Sri Aurobindo’s life and teachings. Written as an academic history text, the biography is clearly not a romantic hagiography although the metaphysical teachings of Sri Aurobindo are given great emphasis in the book. However, the book managed to draw the ire of some Indian members of the *ashram* who, “obtained a temporary injunction against the book in India, and mounted a court case against the *ashram*’s board of

⁷⁹ I also met Heehs a few times when I was in Pondicherry. However, I have not used my conversations with him as ethnographic material since I have used his texts as academic sources. For the sake of academic integrity, I thought it best not to conflate ethnographic and academic sources.

trustees, which refused their demand to expel Heehs” (Gleig 2012, 94). In an academic article written on the development of Sri Aurobindo *ashram* from 1910-2010, in a semi autoethnographic tone, Heehs (2015) explains that the book seemed to offend both, some Indian members of the *ashram* as well as non-member devotees including a group of Indian devotees from Orissa who filed a writ petition in the High Court of Orissa.

During my fieldwork in Pondicherry until 2015, I found that the legal injunction against the book still stood⁸⁰ and there were divided opinions amongst my interlocutors about the book. Ann Gleig, religious studies scholar who has written on Sri Aurobindo’s Integral Yoga, states that on her fieldwork trip to Pondicherry in 2010, she found that responses to the biography ranged from “the apologetic to the apocalyptic: some were outraged that the book portrays a human rather than divine Aurobindo; others more sinisterly saw Heehs as an agent of a cosmic plot to thwart the evolutionary work of Integral Yoga” (Gleig 2012, 94). However, as Gleig notes, the issue at hand is extremely complex representing different interests and it cannot be reduced to a rift between “Western liberals and Indian conservative currents” (ibid). Similar to Gleig, I too found that support for Heehs extended from both Western and Indian members of the *ashram*. Some Westerners I met were also pained by the “mental” as in intellectual treatment of Sri Aurobindo instead of a more devotional approach. Several of my Indian and Western interlocutors were distressed by the factionalism within the *ashram* and condemned the acrimonious response to Heehs. This included those interlocutors who felt that Heehs had not written the biography as a devotee should, but still they insisted that the case against him represented a deeper problem in the *ashram*, that is, the attempt to turn the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother into empty dogma.

It is not my intention here to provide a detailed analysis of the conflict (see Heehs 2015 for the different parties involved and their possible intentions), rather I want to highlight it as an instance of the entanglement of spirituality and religion in terms of the institutionalisation of Sri Aurobindo and Mother’s spiritual teachings and the institutionalisation of their charismatic authority even after their death. Institutionalisation need not necessarily lead to dogma but equally does not rule out the possibility of indoctrination. It is precisely these entanglements of religion and spirituality, essence and practices, universalism and parochialism which faces the *ashram* today and it is also these which need to be acknowledged by anyone attempting to wade into the murky waters of studying contemporary “habits of the heart” (Bellah 1985).

⁸⁰ See the Indian historian Ramachandra Guha’s (2011) article in support of Heehs http://www.telegraphindia.com/1110730/jsp/opinion/story_14295812.jsp. Also see Peter Heehs’ open letter on his biography of Sri Aurobindo <http://www.iyfundamentalism.info/j/index.php/letters/109-ph2manoj>.

Conclusion

As the following chapters should establish, several themes picked on in this chapter such as the emphasis on experientiality, and the Orientalist and nationalist creation of radical difference between the East and the West continue to resonate in contemporary narratives of spiritual seekers. Situating their narratives against the historical backdrop provided in this chapter will help to keep in mind the very modern roots of their antimodernism.

Further, it has been my attempt in this chapter to highlight the contradictions and complexities evident in the creation of spirituality and spiritual India. Placed within their rightful historical context, these creations appear to be genuine attempts to overcome the anxieties which are thought to result from modernity and as trying to offer an alternative. As Versluis (2006) states in the conclusion of his article on antimodernism;

The antimodernists do have important things to tell us [...] They point out the dark side of modern society, its exploitiveness and destructiveness, the ways in which technology and the centralization of power leach meaning from life, fragment us, and separate us into ever greater divisions between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, even as they continue to allure us with greater material prosperity and technological power (129-30).

In this chapter and the rest of this thesis, following Versluis, I endeavour to hear what antimodernists have to tell from within the contours of modernity as heartfelt attempts to overcome the anxieties of living in the modern everyday. If there appear schisms between their idealism and the quotidian world they inhabit, then this is only inevitable, for modernity inheres in itself and inheres in the many contradictions that define it.

JOURNEYS AND MOVEMENT

Chapter 2. Travelling Eastward: Arrival Narratives and the Re-enchantment of India

Introduction

On hot Pondicherry afternoons, the prospect of meeting someone in the air conditioned coolness of a cafe always seemed a welcome one. Then again, I could be trudging to someone's house, an *ashram* department or guest house. Over cups of coffee in one of the numerous cafes or feet resting on the old-style cool red tiles in *ashram* departments, what transpired were sessions of people narrating when and why they came to India and Pondicherry in particular. The whys, the whens and the wheres form the content of their first-arrival narratives⁸¹.

In the guest houses, arrival narratives were usually the first topic of conversation among the guests. Often in my *ashram* guest house cafe or in the common *ashram* dining hall, I could overhear people ask a new acquaintance when they first came to Pondicherry, what brought them here, and which other *ashrams* had they travelled to. Being able to place where one had come from, or which *ashram* one was planning to go to next, forges a network of familiarity and commonality between people hitherto unknown. Commonly known gurus or *ashrams* become the focal points around which stories of the past or plans for the future can be woven.

For the purposes of this chapter, I look at people's narratives of arrival, how they first arrived at Eastern⁸² spirituality in general and Indian spirituality in particular. Many of my interlocutors are "children of the sixties" and had first travelled to India between end-1960s to mid-1970s. It was easy to see common themes emerge in their narratives: stories of first encountering Indian spirituality in the West⁸³, narratives of overland journeying, and tales of disenchantment with their society. At the same time, these are also narratives of individual hopes and imagination, of experiences and aspirations, which along with a historical reading of the 1960s and the ensuing

⁸¹ Henceforth, simply referred to as "arrival narratives" (without quotation marks).

⁸² Experimentation with non-Christian faiths was mainly in the form of experimenting with Buddhism (especially Zen Buddhism) and Hinduism (specifically neo-Vedantic Hinduism). Most of my interlocutors had dabbled in both before they committed themselves to a particular teaching or guru. I situate their interest in Indian spirituality within the broader turn toward Eastern, that is, non-Christian spiritualities. It is for this reason that I have used the terms "Indian" and "Eastern" spirituality interchangeably when referring to the broader interest in non-Christian faiths.

⁸³ This theme will be looked at more detail in the next chapter.

collective turn Eastward, offer an interesting exploration of the ways in which India is imagined as a spiritual place.

The 1960s period deserves special mention for the widespread popularisation of Indian spirituality during this time in parts of Western Europe and the United States. Although as Chapter 1 shows, Americans⁸⁴ and Europeans had long been interested in Indian spirituality, and were instrumental in the dissemination of Indian spirituality in its modern forms, until the 1960s such interest usually extended to small pockets of society such as the Transcendentalists and the Theosophists. It was the counter-culture of the mid-1960s, influenced by the Beats of the 1950s, which popularised Eastern spirituality and brought it to the mainstream youth. Set within the context of a collective reaction against, “the competitive materialism of conventional culture”, a “radical critique of scientific rationalism”, and religiously, “a search for new routes to spiritual enlightenment through the use of mind-expanding techniques and drugs” (Oldmeadow 2004, 248), my interlocutors’ arrival narratives demonstrate the unfolding of personal journeys within a long historical trajectory of “East meets West”. Thus, the first section provides a historical outline of the 1960s’ social, economic and political changes in the United States and parts of Western Europe.

The next section places ethnographic accounts of my interlocutors within the historical context of the 1960s to argue that Weber’s notion of disenchantment can be effectively applied to the arrival narratives, recounting a sense of acute disillusionment and disappointment with society at the time. The arrival narratives are equally narratives of departure from societies that are experienced as hollow, fragmented and meaningless. However, as authors like Jenkins (2000), Landy (2012), and Lee (2003; 2010) have shown, disenchantment contains and creates the possibilities of re-enchantment. In this sense, the turn toward Indian spirituality as a response to disenchantment with Western society is a way of re-enchanting India for the disenchanted youth, even as it is a means of re-enchanting their disenchanted selves.

The third and fourth sections highlight the emphasis on “difference” in the arrival narratives. Using Alex Owen’s (2004) and Jane Bennett’s (2001) ideas of enchantment, I refer to enchantment as a state of wonder and intrigue. The enchanted space of India, thus, refers to the creation of India as a wondrous space. Taken together, the different stories of arriving at India – via disenchantment, difference and departure from the familiar – form the creation story of this enchanting space. The last section returns to the issue of existential lack which seems to have prompted many of my

⁸⁴ Throughout, in speaking of “Americans” I mean “North Americans”.

Western interlocutors to travel Eastward and juxtaposes their narratives with narratives of some of my Indian interlocutors to find points of disjuncture and continuity between them.

Coming of age in the sixties

My earliest introduction to the hippies was through Bollywood. The 1971 Hindi film *Hare Rama Hare Krishna*, set in Nepal, depicts the apparent hedonism of the hippie lifestyle. As a 9 or 10-year old, when I first watched the film, I could not make much of the plot but the hugely popular song *Dum Maro Dum* (“take another drag”) made a lasting impression. The song frames a clearly doped out “Westernised” young Indian woman (played by Zeenat Aman), swaying to music in the company of hippies behind a thick screen of smoke from their *chillums*⁸⁵. The film, “looked at the hippy view of eastern culture, pointing out its irreverence and shallowness” where the West – seen through the hippies’ debauchery – is visualised as, “a place lacking human warmth and familial love, where only material values matter” (Dwyer 2005, 110). Ironically, the 1960s’ counter-culture and the hippies as embodiments of the 1960s’ sentiment, symptomises a critique, however naïve and romantic, of precisely what the film accuses them of – supposedly Western values of materialism, consumerism and individualism⁸⁶. A critique that is nevertheless mired in contradictions and supported by the very institutions that it railed against.

As Marwick (2006) points out, the 1960s in the United States and parts of Western Europe, can be thought of as the “long 1960s” stretching from about 1958 to 1974 (41). The political radicalisation and cultural experimentation that came to characterise an entire generation of baby boomers in the United States and countries such as England, France and Germany were tied to significant political, economic and cultural changes of the past few decades, especially World War II and the post-war era, setting the context for the cultural “revolution” of the 1960s. As Marwick (ibid) notes, one of the most significant characteristics of the 1960s’ decade across the United States and Western European countries was the demographic aspect of unprecedented numbers of young people born during the baby boom time of the 1940s, who, “Thanks to continuing economic growth [...] had

⁸⁵ A small pipe used to smoke cannabis.

⁸⁶ The film *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* clearly rejects the hippie critique of materialism and consumerism by showing it as being located within precisely those values insofar as they encourage “excess” – getting stoned and practising “free love”. The most decisive rejection of the hippie lifestyle combined with the extolling of “Indian” values of familial unity and chaste love comes in the form of Zeenat Aman’s suicide in the film. Aman’s character regrets her lifestyle and prefers committing suicide to meeting her parents in “this state”. The film narrative juxtaposed with the arrival narratives clearly show the tensions inherent in the materialistic West vs. spiritual East dichotomy which comprises the ways in which the West imagines the East, the East imagines the West, and the ways in which the West and the East imagine themselves.

equally unprecedented security and self-confidence” (40). While economic growth and consequent augmentation of consumption had been much slower to take off in post-war Europe due to conditions of rebuilding nations, austerity and international political tensions, for the United States the war and post-war years brought in great affluence and avid consumerism.

World War II ended the Great Depression and its concomitant demand of restrained consumerism in the United States. From the late 1930s onwards the American economy saw sustained growth due to new economic policies, international fiscal borrowing to finance the war, large amounts of military spending, and the creation of nearly 17 million new jobs including job opportunities for women (Horowitz 2004, 35)⁸⁷. In addition to creating new opportunities that enabled increasing consumption patterns during the war⁸⁸, budget experts at the time also encouraged Americans to save more, resulting in greater purchasing power and increased spending on consumer goods such as household appliances, leisure travel and entertainment after the war. Certainly, Americans’ standard of living did not improve suddenly in the immediate post-war years. However, emphasis on economic growth and recovery in the post-World War II and Cold War era led to unparalleled boom in the United States’ economy and sustained greater affluence until at least the early 1970s (Collins 1994).

Government policies and political rhetoric along with many public intellectuals’ discourse during World War II and the Cold War years also helped to give rise to a dominant social belief that private consumption and economic growth were inextricably linked with democracy and social stability, a line of reasoning that would justify the occupation of Vietnam in the name of the United States’ responsibility for maintaining world peace and domestic political stability (Collins 1994; Horowitz 2004). The free market economy was seen as essential to warding off communism, (bolstered by the Cold War anti-Russian politics) as the government’s purported role was seen to be minimal and indeed undesirable in a *laissez faire* economy. By the 1950s, American consumer culture had begun to influence Western European countries, for example, in the form of pop art in Britain where by the late 1950s economic austerity had given way to increasing consumption (Crow 2004). In Germany too by the late 1950s, Confino and Koshar (2001) argue that, “on both sides of the German-German divide was a redefinition of citizenship and nationhood that put consumption at the centre of things” (147).

⁸⁷ For a thorough analysis of shifting political scenarios in the United States between the 1920s and end of the 1960s, see also McMahon (1994)

⁸⁸ Horowitz (2004) notes that during the war years, “In record numbers Americans were spending their money at grocery markets, department stores and movie theaters” (35)

However, although affluence and instant individual gratification were on the rise in the 1950s, Marwick (2006) notes that conservatism in various walks of life still characterised these societies around, “rigid social codes and class distinctions; the subordination of women to men and children to parents; racism [...]; repression, guilt and furtiveness in sexual attitudes and behaviour [...]; unquestioning respect for authority in the family, education, government, the law, religion, and for the nation-state, the national flag, the national anthem” (40). Many of these aspects came to be challenged by the mid-1950s as seen in the civil rights movement in the United States. By the mid-1960s almost all the areas listed above had been targeted by sections of the youth, particularly middle class, college educated youth in the United States and some Western European countries. Given the large proportion of young people in the overall population of these countries, the youth were generally held as the chief propeller of change. The consumer goods industry played no small part in this transformation as it targeted young customers marketing jeans, cosmetics, music records and other commodities to them, treating them as agents in their own right (Siegfried 2006, 63). Arjun Appadurai (1996) argues that while consumption is linked to the idea of agency since consumers must act as free agents to exercise their choice, such agency can in fact become a form of drudgery as consumption patterns become routine, monotonous and an end in itself. Thus, choice and agency resulted in youth disenchantment with consumption even as the rejection of mainstream consumerism in the form of “‘doing your own thing’ and ‘individual expression’” (Marwick 2006, 47) can be seen as variants of choice and agency afforded by what we may call the consumer revolution.

Simultaneously, a significant percentage of the youth, ensconced in the historical and economic context of financial security and privilege, came into their own as not simply consumers but also as agents of political change and responsibility. This is not to say that there was a homogenous youth culture at the time in the United States and across the Atlantic but the youth emerging as political agents was indeed a shared feature, testament in the rise of student protests in the United States, England, France and West Germany in the latter half of the 1960s. American society witnessed radical political upheavals such as the civil rights and women’s liberation movements, concurrent legislations such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the resurgence of leftist and left-leaning counter-politics and anti-Vietnam protests. These framed the social, political and economic context

within which conservatism, conformity and consumerism came to be challenged by different sections of society⁸⁹.

At the same time, “related to all of these, was an upheaval in personal and family relationships and in public and private morals, subverting the authority of men over women and parents over children” (Marwick 2006, 43-44). Institutions such as the family and the church came to be questioned by many young people at the time. In the critique of the counter-culture, the church - and the institutions of family and marriage - were seen to augment a regimented, conformist and conservative lifestyle that reduced human beings to their functional roles in society as opposed to enabling people to realise their true self. Tipton (1982) argues that the 1960s’ counter-culturalists saw Christianity and the church as, “reiterating the verbalism, intellectualism and lack of ecstatic experience they found in utilitarian culture, as well as its associational, bureaucratic organization” (19). Consequently, both the Catholic church and Protestant denominations saw a significant decline in church membership, attendance and influence among the youth throughout the decade (Roof 1999; Tipton 1982).

Roof (1999) examines the changing nature of religious discourse in the 1960s in the United States which, “contributed in bringing about, interestingly, both a loss of faith in the institutionalized form of religion and its rejuvenation as a personal, spiritual quest” (63-64). Drawing on the work of Robert Wuthnow, Roof (ibid) points out that in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Christian religious discourses lay greater emphasis on individual piety and faith⁹⁰, an emphasis which found favour in

⁸⁹ It is important to note that while conservatism in social and political spheres was being challenged by certain sections of society with liberalism and left oriented politics including the emergence of the New Left, at the same time, “conservative populism and religious fundamentalism” (Farber 1994, 4) were also reconsolidated in the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, “arch-conservative Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona” was nominated, “as the Republican presidential candidate in 1964” in the United States (ibid). West Germany saw, “the rise of the extreme right-wing Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (established in 1964) [...] since the year 1966” and England saw the growing popularity of the conservative British National Front since 1972 (Schildt and Seigfried 2006, 11). Similarly, Lipsitz (1994) notes, “most Americans supported the war in Vietnam throughout the sixties, and [...] they opposed most of the specific objectives of both the civil rights and black power movements” (208).

⁹⁰ The emphasis on individual piety can be located within the Cold War context when the modern individual was seen to be in opposition to the communistic ideal of the collective. John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State during Eisenhower’s presidency, declared during the Cold War that, “‘the most significant demonstration’ that Americans could make of their resolve against the Soviets ‘is at the religious level’. Confronted with such spiritual fortitude, the Kremlin would soon see the futility of conflict ‘against a people who believe that their freedoms flow from their Creator and who also use those freedoms with the restraint which is enjoyed by divine commandment’” (Inboden 2008, 36; statements within quotation marks are from Dulles’ speech cited in Inboden). Dulles’s view represents the Protestant influence in American political

the 1960s albeit as a critique of institutions such as the church. Thus, although Protestant Christianity was in decline as far as allegiance to its institutions went, its values of interiorised piety, individualism and intellectual inquiry were incorporated into a cultural context where religion increasingly became a matter of preference and opinion, “Generally, during this period a new cultural context for religion was emerging, one in which faith was increasingly psychologised and viewed as a matter of one’s choice and in keeping with one’s own experience” (Roof 1999, 65).

Central to the changing religious ethos was the inward-looking-self in search of authenticity and truth. Turning away from organised Christianity was the primary impetus for those experimenting with Eastern religious traditions, seen as essentially gnostic and mystical and therefore radically different from Christianity and the church⁹¹. Certainly, the mainstream turn to Indian spirituality signalled a significant change in American and Western religious patterns, the reverberations of which continue to be felt today. The baby boomers, then, did have a major impact on the cultural dynamics of their societies. But as far as the politics of the cultural critique in the form of alternative spirituality is concerned, it could not develop into a radical critique of consumerism. Anti-church attitude exemplified by the turn toward Eastern religious traditions signalled the availability of the latter as an alternative *choice* available for private consumption. As previously mentioned, personal and national identity post-World War II came to be defined increasingly by lifestyle and consumption. This gave, “greater autonomy to the cultural sphere, set(ing) in motion a proliferation of popular cultural forms, less and less bounded by the social locations in which they originated [...] with far-reaching implications for an expanding production of culture, reaching deeply into religious and secular life” (Roof 1999, 49-50). The dislocation of Asian religious traditions made them available as a cultural commodity in the West which explains the spiritual eclecticism and experimentation of the time: psychedelic drugs with mantras, *Teachings of Don Juan* (1968)⁹² with *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946)⁹³, Zen Buddhism with yoga; no combination

leadership of the time. For the political positions of various Protestant theologians within the political climate of the Cold War were varied and for a detailed analysis of these, see Inboden 2008.

⁹¹ See Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of my interlocutors’ rejection of Christianity and their reconstruction of the self using neo-Hinduism, particularly neo-Vedanta.

⁹² In *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (1968), Carlos Castaneda creates a (now known to be) fictional account of his apprenticeship with a Yaqui India shaman. In his eloquent prose, Castaneda builds a picture of Don Juan and by extension of Native American wisdom as the answer to the personal, existential crises of young Americans looking to ‘drop out’ of their (for the most part) comfortable, orderly lives. Anthropologist Richard Price (2011), looking back at his own favourable response to *Don Juan* in the late 1960s, writes that the book, “can be seen as growing full-blown out of the spiritual needs of the late 1960s – on the one hand the needs of questing college students; on the other hand the needs of young anthropologists who’d come to the end of their fathers’ paradigms. It’s not surprising that the books satisfied

was unthinkable. Even as the counter-culturalists sought to break away from mainstream consumerism, the discourse of spirituality embraced alternative forms of cultural consumerism.

Various factors aided in the availability of Eastern spirituality to baby boomer seekers and in its representation as self-fulfilling in contrast to the church. In Chapter 1, I discussed the significant role played by Transcendentalists such as Henry Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. The romantic writings of Thoreau and Emerson invoke, “love of the distant and the past [...] to the unimaginably old and far places [...] to immensely ancient temples reflecting in lotus ponds or banked by Himalayan snows” (Ellwood 1987, 11). The Orientalism of the Transcendentalists was carried forward by Theosophists like Henry Olcott and Madame Blavatsky as well as Eastern figures like Swami Vivekananda and the Japanese Zen master D.T. Suzuki⁹⁴. Both Vivekananda and Suzuki promoted the image of Asian religious traditions (Vedanta and Zen Buddhism respectively) as experiential, universalist and non-theistic, characteristics which made these compatible with the anti-establishment and inwardly driven, personalised religiosity of those like my interlocutors. After a lull period during the war, Eastern spiritualities were re-popularised in post war 1950s United States by some of the Beats, their praise similar to and influenced by the Orientalist trends mentioned before. The Beats were instrumental to the “Zen boom” (Iwamura 2011) in the 1950s. Later in this chapter, I shall explore the Beats’ fascination with Zen Buddhism as a means to reject the 1950s’ post-war affluence and middle-class norms, a critique which would find favour with the 1960s’ youth. Suffice it to say here that for the 1960s’ youth, the Beats were influential in pointing to Asia as the source of alternative religiosity⁹⁵.

Where the Beats had popularised Zen Buddhism (loosely) sourced from Japan, in the latter half of the 1960s Indian spirituality in the United States was bolstered by the arrival of Hindu gurus following the 1965 amendment to the 1917 immigration act, removing earlier quotas blocking Asian immigration. As discussed in the next chapter, the presence of flesh-and-blood gurus and the escalating media attention given them played a major role in refocusing the spotlight from Zen

more than a million readers and not a few anthropologists. We all needed Don Juan then – both the nascent New Agers and the fledgling professional anthropologists” (139). Indigenous spirituality exemplified the premodern, true past lost in the modern world.

⁹³ See Chapter 3 for a discussion of *Autobiography*.

⁹⁴ See Iwamura (2011) for a discussion of D.T. Suzuki’s work and life in the United States.

⁹⁵ Of further notable influence at the time was Aldous Huxley and his perennialist philosophy – see Chapter 4 in the context of Kiran’s perennialist philosophy.

Buddhism to neo-Hinduism⁹⁶. For instance, the celebrity status accorded to the Indian guru Maharshi Mahesh Yogi by the American and British media through his association with the Beatles in the late 1960s can be seen as an important moment in the re-enchantment of spiritual India, for it brought the flowing-hair-ochre-robed guru (the individual persona of the Maharshi as well as the quintessential image of the Indian holy man) to the forefront of public consciousness. Further, in the 1960s the Japanese economy was rapidly growing and several global events such as the 1964 Olympics held in Tokyo and the 1970 tech Expo in Osaka projected Japan as highly modern and on the road to technological advancement at par with Western nations making it unsuitable for continued projections of antimodern spirituality. India, by contrast, was still radically different and supposedly pre-modern, and in that, emerged as really the Other for seekers.

Disenchantment and disaffections

Many of my interlocutors first turned toward Indian spirituality as young men and women living in the United States and Western European countries in the 1960s and 1970s, in search of a different way of life. Many physically travelled to India for the first time during these politically and culturally tumultuous decades; others travelled to India much later but turned to Indian spirituality during the 1960s and 1970s. In all their narratives, there is a sense of palpable dissatisfaction with life in the societies they grew up in and questioning of uninhibited consumerism, individualism and conformism. I argue that their turn to Indian and more generally to Eastern spirituality was first and foremost a response to their disenchantment with their society at that time. It is this departure that underwrites their arrival at Eastern spirituality and subsequently at the physical territory of India.

One scorching afternoon in Pondicherry, I interviewed an American woman, Kiran, in her room at the *ashram* run guest house. Sitting cross legged on the bed – a posture testament to the many years of sitting on hard floors in India - she spoke about her life in the United States and growing up in the 1960s. Kiran recounts her decision to finish higher education:

Those were the days when there was a lot of ferment politically. I was a teenager during the '60s, so, and I went to [...] I started university in 1970. So that was a kind of turning point, I mean the '60s were really like, suddenly, all the young people were questioning the system, and all of the flaws and the evils of American capitalism were suddenly showing through [laughs] and so there was this feeling that [...] I mean [...] for me it was very exhilarating, it was like the whole generation really wanted to create change, create a more meaningful life, more caring life or more loving life and, and certainly spirituality was part of that. You know, a deeper meaning to life than just materialism and consuming things.

⁹⁶ See Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion of the Westward movement of Indian gurus from the 1960s onwards.

For people like Kiran, the 1960s movement can be seen as a collective expression of a deeply felt personal disillusionment with a materialistic life, one which privileged conspicuous consumption, competitiveness, greater reliance on technology (with all its connotations of coldness, impersonality and in-humaneness) and a high degree of individualism. While the 1960s era and the “hippie way of life” were many things at once – sit-ins, acid, communes, the Beatles, free love, the New Left – Stuart Hall (1968⁹⁷) argues that its consistency derived from its challenge to the social norms and values that characterised middle-class American society of the time. The 1960s movement, “argued that America needed a sweepingly new ethics appropriate to an age characterized by never-ending global power struggles, technocracy, urbanization, environmental catastrophe, and new psychedelic chemistry” (Miller 1991, xiv).

Kiran captures some of the central tenets of this “sweepingly new ethics”, that is, the attempt to create a meaningful life seen as a contrast to a materialistic, shallow and unfulfilling way of life. Tipton (1982) argues, “The countercultural critique of the mainstream culture and its alternative views as a coherent if unsystematic set of meanings, norms, and social thought” was “in opposition to utilitarian individualism” (14). Tipton goes on to write that the 1960s’ countercultural critique of mainstream society opposed the utilitarian dualisms of self/other and mind/matter to universal monism centred on conceptions of universal love and fraternity as expressed by Kiran, “more caring life [...] more loving life”. Mainstream values of the good life for individuals were seen to contribute to collective greed and excess, including the excesses of war. For many, the Vietnam War exemplified what Roszak (1968) calls “technocratic totalitarianism”, that is, a highly mechanistic, bureaucratised society which justified a means-end approach to fulfil its own wants or self-interest at the cost of humanity.

By the end of the 1960s, with inflation rising in the United States, it was clear that inequality still persisted in terms of racism and patriarchal norms, and the Vietnam War had clearly begun to be recognised as unjust by young college-goers who, “had (by-and-large) been educated in terms of liberal, humanistic values [...] came to perceive the mainstream as ‘straight’ and oppressive” (Heelas 1996, 139). Kiran said that from a very young age, “the value system made no sense to me because life’s just about running around, stressing themselves out to make a lot of money, to have a big house, to have a big car, have a family and then die and I thought [laughing], what?!!” On a similar note, Kenneth, a Canadian man in his 60s and a self-proclaimed erstwhile hippie, spoke to me about “being rebellious” and against careerism, “against the whole establishment thing. In

⁹⁷ Article available here <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-artslaw/history/cccs/stencilled-occasional-papers/1to8and11to24and38to48/SOP16.pdf>

University there were IBM, Hewlett Packard, all these companies were coming to interview all the students. As soon as you graduated, they were in a job in the US, that's no way [...] I didn't want to get involved in any of that". Timothy Leary's slogan "Tune In, Turn on and Drop out", became a catchphrase of the 1960s, capturing the felt existential need to "tune in" to and "turn on" a different, more authentic experience of the world by "dropping out" of the ordinary or taken for granted routines of society without advocating a political and structural transformation. An American *ashramite* tells me, "It was not like everyone woke up one day and decided they were going to be a hippie. But among the choices that people were making one was kind of to drop out. And not just get off the conveyor belt of career and everything like that" but as one of my interlocutors, Sally, put it, seeking "a new way of life".

Placing these narratives within the context of the 1960s helps us to understand that these are also voices of privilege. All my interlocutors are white and predominantly come from middle class families. They had been university students or drop-outs and as young men and women of the time enjoyed unprecedented agency as young adults. It is important to remember that just as some sections of society were decrying consumerism, so the more marginalised sections were asserting their right to participate in the consumer culture. In the United States, for instance, "in the late 1960s and early 1970s, women on welfare started to demand decent treatment from welfare officers as well as fuller participation in consumer culture than meagre benefits allowed" (Horowitz 2004, 164). The choice to drop out was something that came to accrue to many of my interlocutors as a result of affluence, not despite it, expressing, "the emerging ethic of a relatively narrow post-industrial elite" (Tipton 1982, 27). While not doubting the genuineness of people's spiritual quest, issues of ethnic, economic and political privilege prevail especially when examining cross-cultural meanderings on the spiritual path.

Although work and routinisation of life (coalesced in the figure of the much hated but poorly defined "Establishment") were seen to be alienating, for many young people of the time – despite participation in left-oriented politics – the solution was not necessarily in a Marxist revolutionary transformation of society. Rather the solution was often found through withdrawing from everyday life in order to live an alternative lifestyle. Although "rebellious against the whole establishment thing", as Kenneth put it, might indeed have been difficult and personally liberating for individuals, at a collective level "dropping out" left the political status quo as it was. There was also resurgence in academic interest in religion during the early and mid-1960s in the United States when religious studies departments were established in the tradition of Humanistic disciplines in universities. During the Cold War era, the Humanities disciplines were considered as important as the natural

science disciplines to ensure the, “worldwide pre-eminence of the so-called Western culture” (McCutcheon 2004, 43). In 1965, Clyde Holbrook, who established the first religious studies department within the liberal arts curriculum in the United States, argued that religion be included in the Humanities because, “religious phenomena constitute so large a segment of human experience that without specialized study and instruction in it, a college or university could scarcely be regarded as offering a liberalizing education” (Holbrook cited in McCutcheon 2004, 43). McCutcheon (2004) goes on to demonstrate that the United States government funded several religious studies departments in various national universities including programs on Oriental religion, Near Eastern and Middle Eastern Religion, and Buddhist Studies from 1959-1963 (51). Thus, while experimenting with other religions may have been considered by some as being politically radical at the time, it was in part made available through political conservatism.

However, as many of my interlocutors mentioned, they were trying to change their own consciousness, with the central idea that a collective change in individual consciousness(es) would inevitably lead to a better world. From their perspective, working on one’s consciousness is not escapism, it is the only way to work *on* the world in order to improve it. In *A Season in Heaven*, a popular book on the experiences of overland travellers in the 1960s and 1970s, an Italian respondent interviewed by the author says that for them going to India was seen as part of anti-capitalism (Tomory 1998, 26). Interestingly, toward the end of her narrative, Tomory’s respondent expresses her disillusionment with “politics” as experienced by many of her generation by the early 1970s. The Vietnam War had certainly contributed to the disillusionment, and many of those who had been “anti-establishment” in the 1960s, as Kiran told me, went on to become a part of it as doctors and lawyers. The only way to change the world then, as some of my interlocutors felt, was to change yourself – representing the paradox of challenging capitalism through, “a discourse of ‘spirituality’[...] grounded in the modern capitalist ideology of individualism” (Carrette and King 2005, 180).

Nonetheless, as Chapter 4 shows, most of my interlocutors endeavour to reconstruct their selves through connection with the guru and the divine, moving beyond the idea of the individual as the chief agent of one’s life. Chapter 5 looks at the ways in which the idea of changing one’s self is central to their future aspirations, whereby they envisage an interconnected world of ethical selves where each one strives to develop and realise their individual consciousness to its highest potential for the greater good. In such a view the explicit emphasis on the self is intimately connected with an implicit emphasis on the collective. Kiran’s beliefs demonstrate this:

If the material level of life were organised in a cooperative, economical, simple, sustainable way, then people would have lots of time for the inner work, for spirituality, for creativity, for philosophy, for studying cause for me that's where the riches lay, you know. But in order that people could do that, you need a stable, material base. And for the material base to be stable it needs to be egalitarian, to be cooperative, everybody needs food, shelter, clothing, wholesome health care. So, that's how I always saw it.

Even as Kiran believed that the transformation of society will neither come from “top-down politics” nor legislation as, according to her, it has to come from change in individual consciousness, she was equally disappointed with “spiritual people, people who are talking about oneness and interconnections all day long” who did nothing to combine individual spiritual practice with social activism. Throughout the time I spent with Kiran, she was trying to find a spiritual community that addressed contemporary issues such as ecological crises in a creative and collective way. Versluis (2006) argues that “religious antimodernism” provides “an affirmation of enduring values that make life meaningful [...] love of the divine, love of one's neighbour, love of nature” (128). He calls such affirmation based on the rejection of modern mainstream values “soft antimodernism” (a term he uses explicitly in the context of new religious movements), a critique of modernity made from within its own structures in order to “affirm a vision of a better society” (130). The agonism of collective interconnectedness and individual transformation runs through contemporary discourses of spirituality exemplifying the tensions inherent in positing the individual as the chief instigator of collective good.

As part of the rejection of mainstream values, utilitarian self-interest in terms of pursuing a career, for example, came to be undermined in favour of self-expression, a view Paul Heelas (1996) refers to as, “the ‘expressive revolution’ taking place during the 1960s” (135). For those like Kiran and Kenneth, following the well-trodden path of education, career, marriage and children was perceived as being locked into “repressive” institutions, stopping them from understanding and expressing their true selves – an inward looking, intimate self, free of social structures and constraints. Many of my interlocutors recounted grappling with questions related to the true nature of one self, questions which they felt had no scope of articulation. Kiran narrated:

I learnt not even to talk about such things because if I asked my parents, ‘what are we doing here? Why are we here? And what are we? And what happens after we die? Where do we come from? Where do we go?’, my parents, I mean my parents are lovely, you know, they liked the fact that I was an inquisitive sort of child but still my mother would say, you know, some questions you just can't ask! You'll end up in a mental hospital!

Jerry, in his first meeting with me, recounting his hippie days said that, disgruntled and disenchanted with his life in the United States and the general state of affairs, “I became a very

passionate and bitter young man”. Like Kiran, Jerry expressed a frustrated inability to voice “the burning questions”, as Jerry put it, of “who am I (and) why am I here”.

It is not difficult to read Weber’s notion of disenchantment into the narratives of Jerry, Sally and Kiran. *Entzauberung der Welt* or the “disenchantment of the world”, according to Max Weber (2008), is the inevitable condition of modern society characterised by a high degree of rationalisation and bureaucratisation extending to every sphere of the modern life, especially the magico-religious sphere. As a consequence of rationalisation and the growing strength of science, he argues, magic and mystery has been eliminated from the world, and hence, the world is experienced as disenchanted. In *Science as a Vocation* (2008)⁹⁸ where he further develops the idea of disenchantment more after briefly mentioning it in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930), Weber writes, “The increasing intellectualization and rationalization [...] means that there are, in principle, no mysterious unpredictable forces in play, but that all things - in principle – can be *controlled through calculation*. This, however, means the disenchantment of the world” (35). Central to the process of disenchantment is the evacuation of mystery and magic from the world. Everything is knowable, at least in principle. However, as many scholars have since shown both disenchantment and enchantment or the means to re-enchantment co-exist in modern society (Lee 2010; Morgan 2009; Sherry 2009). Raymond L.M. Lee (2003) writes:

Re-enchantment [...] is the mirror of disenchantment, reflecting the illusory nature of reification created by the desire for materialistic gains. Looking into this mirror, the disenchanted self equivocates on the meaning of its existence and yearns for an answer beyond the conventional reality derived from the power of abstraction. This reflection is, however, not made outside the capitalist framework that encases the construction and reconstruction of reality. In other words, re-enchantment is not independent off capitalist concerns. On the contrary, the initiative for re-enchantment is rooted in various forms of capitalist expansionism (352).

Quoting J.J. Clarke, Lee substantiates his argument with the example of “the origins of South Asian Orientalism” and the Orientalist attraction to Indian religions as inextricably linked with colonial expansion and “the capitalist desire for control that made possible the Western drift toward the Asian sources of re-enchantment, as a revolt against the stultifying effects of disenchantment in the modern West” (Lee 2003, 353). The Orientalist and Romantic approaches to “spiritual India” were enabled precisely within the frameworks of colonialism and expansionism even when, paradoxically, Romanticism strove to be anti-colonial by using the non-West as an alternative to the West. It is interesting that disenchantment not only co-exists with enchantment, but in fact it creates

⁹⁸ Lecture given by Weber at the University of Munich on 7 November 1917.

the possibilities of re-enchantment. Indeed, it contains within itself the conditions of re-enchantment as a mechanism for coping. Lee argues that Weber is not blind to the co-existence of disenchantment and enchantment, and it is why he devotes so much time to the concept of charisma and magic in his works (2010). Despite modernisation and disenchantment, modern society is never completely devoid of enchantment where, “every event transcending the routines of everyday life releases charismatic forces, and every extraordinary ability creates charismatic beliefs” if only to be “subsequently weakened again by everyday life” by being re-incorporated into the processes of bureaucratisation and routinisation (Weber quoted in Lee 2010, 185).

Where Weber leaves off, it is possible to suggest that everyday life routinises the extraordinary and the enchanted, only to turn to that which is outside its grasp so that disenchantment and (re)enchantment are in a relationship of constant reinforcement. On careful scrutiny we see that “modernity embraces seeming contraries, such as rationality and wonder, secularism and faith” (Landy and Saler quoted in Hagerty 2014, 432). Thus, for the Westerner, India is re-enchanted through people’s travels and the 1960s’ imaginary of India as a mystical and wondrous place. The dialectic of disenchantment and re-enchantment does not lead to a return to the actual sources of lost enchantment (they cannot be recovered, only re-imagined), but rather enables a moving toward re-created sources of enchantment, a simulation of the mythical, lost spiritual past. It is this process of creative, but not politically innocent, re-enchantment that signals why it is an enchantment focussed on and located elsewhere: temporal and cultural distance from the modern West is crucial to the maintenance of authenticity.

I also want to briefly mention here that narratives of disenchantment are not limited to those who travelled to India in the 1960s and 1970s. Several of my interlocutors who are more recent travellers to India also spoke about their lives in the West as being meaningless. A French woman, Luna, in her 30s and volunteering in one of the schools in Auroville, talked to me about her feelings of disillusionment with life in France. She felt that people in France were always busy trying to make a living – she gave the metaphor of a headless chicken running around - and leaving them with no time for quiet contemplation. Similar thoughts were echoed by Anna, a Hungarian devotee of Sri Aurobindo and Mother, who had been travelling to Pondicherry since 2012. She said to me that life in the West was “artificial” and people had no time in their busy schedules to pause and think about their “inner life”. For Anna, the teachings of Indian gurus, specifically Sri Aurobindo and Mother, offered a way of understanding the deeper meaning of life beyond the “surface” reality of career and money. As the narratives show, the search for meaning in life, at once equated with the desire to know oneself, was at the heart of their spiritual quest.

In *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*, Alex Owen (2004) writes, “Weber crucially understood [...] that the desire and search for meaning is central to human experience. His social theories suggest that for cultures where traditional religious or metaphysical belief systems have been eroded, as in the modern ‘disenchanted’ West⁹⁹, the major challenge is to generate a new coherent worldview and concomitant sense of ethical place and purpose” (254). On a similar note Anthony Giddens (1991) argues,

Personal meaninglessness – the feeling that life has nothing worthwhile to offer – becomes a fundamental psychic problem in circumstances of late modernity. We should understand this phenomenon in terms of a repression of moral questions which day-to-day life poses, but which are denied answers. ‘Existential isolation’ is not so much a separation of individuals from others as a separation from the moral resources necessary to live a full and satisfying existence (9).

It is in this context of spiralling meaninglessness, of something gone wrong, of something lacking (the necessary moral resources in Giddens’ terms), that many of my interlocutors turned to India specifically for answers¹⁰⁰.

Turning toward India via difference and distance

Extending Lee’s argument that, “Western individuals sought re-enchantment as a counter-cultural process to modernity” (2010), I have argued that Indian or Eastern spirituality was catalysed to fill the existential void of the disenchanted youth. Their interest in Eastern spirituality had its direct predecessors in the form of the “Beats” in the 1950s. Of the Beat Generation, Jack Kerouac (1922-1969), Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997), and Gary Snyder (b1930), were influential in re-enchanting the West via Eastern religions as they mobilised Eastern spirituality through poems, songs, art, and basically, “opening up what had been the domain of stuffy academics and stiff translators to a mainstream audience” (Tomkinson quoted in Oldmeadow 2004, 245)

For the Beats and for the 1960s’ counter-cultural youth, interest in Asia was fuelled by a rejection of middle-class norms and middle-class religiosity, which in the 1950s, was largely confined to Christianity or Judaism. They viewed, “the Asian religions as a means of transcending Western civilization’s institutional and psychological barriers to achieve higher consciousness. For the

⁹⁹ Interestingly, opinions of my interlocutors regarding Christianity and its effect on spirituality could be grouped around two broad themes – one, Christianity in terms of the church and ecclesiastical hierarchy has overpowered spirituality and has thus lost something important; two, the weakening of Christianity in the West led to an erosion of spirituality. This has been discussed below.

¹⁰⁰ I argue in the next chapter that my interlocutors reject Christian narratives and “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1988) as well as mainstream consumerism in favour of a recreated and re-enchanted self through primarily neo-Vedantic, neo-Hindu thought.

Beats, Asian spirituality provided a path to ecstasy and liberation rather than to order and harmony” (Jackson 1988, 68). This is exemplified in Jack Kerouac’s autobiographical novel *The Dharma Bums* (1986¹⁰¹). In it, Kerouac makes many references to Zen Buddhism which, although highly romantic, are seldom accurate. In his writing Zen Buddhism comes across as spontaneous and non-conformist, although it requires discipline, long hours of meditation and regular instructions from a Zen master.

Unlike Kerouac, Gary Snyder, on whom the protagonist of *The Dharma Bums* was largely modelled, was more profoundly influenced by Zen Buddhism as was Allen Ginsberg who sought spirituality in Hinduism. Also, unlike Kerouac who had never travelled to Asia and yet presented himself as a wandering, spiritual enlightenment seeking nomad-pilgrim, both Snyder and Ginsberg travelled to Asia in their spiritual quest. Snyder travelled to Japan to formally study Zen Buddhism, while Ginsberg travelled to India. In anticipation of his Indian journey, Ginsberg remarked, “I’m deliriously happy, it’s my promised land” (Ginsberg cited in Jackson 1988, 61). Although Kerouac later in his life turned his back on Buddhism in favour of Catholicism, all three were significant in creating and presenting Asian religions as largely experiential and as enabling a personal connection with the divine.

Many of my interlocutors were deeply influenced in their youth by Kerouac, Ginsberg and Snyder. But the 1960s also saw a resurgence of writers like Emerson and Thoreau who had inspired some of the Beats’ Eastward turn. A later generation of writers such as Herman Hesse also found enthusiastic resurgence among the youth. Sally, for instance, recalls, “I think people were full up with certain books and things like ‘Autobiography of a Yogi’¹⁰², ‘Search in Secret India’, Herman Hesse, of course”. Frank, an American devotee of Sri Aurobindo and Mother, also remembered reading Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, “I had read in my senior year of high school¹⁰³ this book ‘Siddhartha’ by Herman Hesse and that also touched me, fascinated me. So, that was when I kind of started looking Eastward”¹⁰⁴. The German poet, short-story writer and novelist, Herman Hesse (1887-1962), was best remembered by my interlocutors for *Siddhartha* which gained popularity in the United States among the youth, most notably with Timothy Leary and Ralph Metzner’s praise for him in their article published in the *Psychedelic Review* in 1963. Leary and Metzner (1963)

¹⁰¹ First published 1958.

¹⁰² See next chapter for discussion of *Autobiography*.

¹⁰³ In the early 1970s.

¹⁰⁴ The textual bases of forming an eclectic personal spiritual repertoire brings to mind the Protestant derived means of religious activity and quest, arising out of sola scriptura. See Chapter 1 for the Protestant emphasis on texts and its implications for the textualisation of Hinduism.

portrayed Hesse as a mystic-teacher who teaches his readers to always, “stay close to the internal core” (181).

Egon Schwarz (1970) argues that there are several shared affinities between the themes of Hesse’s novels and, “American dissidents” of the 1960s (981). Most of Hesse’s novels, Schwarz writes, in addition to being about alienated people looking to find meaning in their lives, also target, “the state and ultimately any authority except the spiritual authorities freely chosen by the individual himself” (ibid, 982). Reflecting on Hesse’s popularity with American students, Ziolkowski (1970) wrote that they, “look to Hesse not so much for a broadening of their awareness as for a confirmation of their own experience” (30). On a similar note, Schwarz (1970) too points out, “Only Hesse the novelist is being appropriated by the American dissidents. The poet, the essayist, even the short-story writer, have so far been ignored” (981). A selective reading of Hesse’s writings served as a validation of the counter-cultural values of radical individualism and anti-authoritarianism. In *Siddhartha*, the protagonist asserts to his friend Govinda that wisdom cannot be learnt from anyone or anything, it can only be found in and through one’s own experiences, “wisdom cannot be passed on [...] It can be found, it can be lived, it is possible to be carried by it, miracles can be performed with it, but it cannot be expressed in words and taught” (Hesse 2008)¹⁰⁵. Hesse’s writings exemplified the deeply interiorised – it is not incidental that Hesse had a Protestant upbringing given his parents were Protestant missionaries – and individualistic journey of self-discovery and transcendent wisdom that characterised the spiritual quest of many like my interlocutors.

In *Siddhartha*, Hesse underscores self-discovery and personal experience over any form of institutionalised learning and teaching. Paradoxically, such an interiorised, individualistic pursuit of self-discovery and spiritual wisdom became institutionalised as *the* authentic form of spiritual seeking, as well as inspiring many young Americans and Western Europeans to collectively follow an individualistic path to self-discovery by embedding themselves in well-organised institutions such as *ashrams* and *guru-shishya parampara* in India¹⁰⁶.

As can be seen from the above, certain texts gained wide currency during the 1960s and 1970s, promoting the idea of India as a spiritual place, a topic I will explore again in the next chapter.

¹⁰⁵ http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2500/2500-h/2500-h.htm#2H_4_0013

¹⁰⁶ Hesse’s *The Journey to the East* (1956) also promoted the idea of Asia as the true home of the soul. The novel’s protagonist who goes by the initials, H.H., says, “I realized that I had joined a pilgrimage to the East, seemingly a definite and single pilgrimage—but in reality, in its broadest sense, this expedition to the East was not only mine and now; this procession of believers and disciples had always and incessantly been moving towards the East, towards the Home of the Light” (Hesse 1956, 12)

Johann, a German practitioner of Integral Yoga, recalled that in the 1970s, there were many bookstores selling spiritual books, “everywhere you could buy spiritual books, hundreds of different books”. His own interest in Indian spirituality was initiated by a book that his mother gave him as a Christmas present when he was in his teens – Paul Brunton’s *A Search in Secret India* (1985¹⁰⁷). Again, Brunton’s book is considered a classic by many of my interlocutors. Luigi, an Italian interlocutor of mine, used to own a bookshop in Milan in the 1970s where he stocked many books on India including Brunton’s books which he thought highly of. *A Search in Secret India* was central to popularising the Indian sage Sri Ramana Maharshi in the Western world.

Sri Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950)¹⁰⁸ is much loved and venerated among both Indian and Western devotees and spiritual seekers. Ramana’s teaching of non-dualism rest on experience which he insisted was available to all. His perennialist philosophy appeals to all those who, “favour the notion of a transnational, transcultural ‘mystical’ experience at the heart of all religions” (Forsthoefel 2005, 38), but he was hardly known to Western seekers until Brunton’s account of meeting Ramana was published in the form of *A Search*. The book is a meant to be Brunton’s adventurous excursion into “secret India”, the India of yogis and sages which he claims, “has been hidden from prying eyes for thousands of years, which has kept itself so exclusive that to-day only its rapidly disappearing remnants are left” (Brunton 1985, 15). Brunton travels across India in search of his “master”, someone with deep and genuine spiritual knowledge. It is notable that while Brunton is unhesitant and unwavering in his criticisms and judgement of various gurus, and yogis, he has no doubt whatsoever in his own capability of discernment which is, “a scientific desire of critically and impartially finding the facts” unsullied by his “sympathy with Oriental methods of probing life’s mysteries” (Brunton 1985, 17). Thus, Brunton presents himself as a highly credible investigator of gurus with hopes of finding a present day guru who would embody the ideal of guru-as-repository-of-ancient-wisdom. It is all the more striking, then, when Brunton’s characteristic arrogance and investigative scepticism seem to vanish in his accounts of his meeting with Sri Ramana Maharshi.

During his first encounter with the Maharshi, Brunton experiences inexplicable calm and peace. Brunton leaves Sri Ramana’s *ashram* after a few days but subsequently realises that the Maharshi is

¹⁰⁷ First published in 1934.

¹⁰⁸ For studies on Sri Ramana’s philosophy and its appeal in the United States, see Lucas (2011). For an autobiographical approach combined with sociological perspectives on Sri Ramana Maharshi, see Visvanathan (2010).

indeed his master and, so, makes his way back to Ramana. Toward the end of the book, Brunton (1985) has this to say of Sri Ramana:

I study him intently and gradually come to see in him the child of a remote Past, when the discovery of spiritual truth was reckoned of no less value than is the discovery of a gold mine today. It dawns upon me with increasing force that in this quiet and obscure corner of South India, I have been led to one of the last of India's spiritual supermen. The serene figure of this living sage brings the legendary figures of his country's ancient Rishis nearer to me (301).

Clearly, Brunton does little to demystify India. Rather, his quest is undertaken as a journey into a mythical land of sages and seers. To Brunton, Ramana is a living symbol of the golden past which he seems to have chanced upon. Writers like Hesse, Brunton, and the Beats popularised imaginaries of India as a land of ancient spiritual wisdom, and made India immediately accessible to a range of readers, all the while mystifying it¹⁰⁹. “Full up” with these books and imaginaries, as Sally said,

¹⁰⁹ I must mention here Mercea Eliade's classic text on yoga, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (1958), which also contributed to the idea of spiritual India. Eliade writes highly of yoga as one of, “the great discoveries of Indian thought” (1958, xx) which occupies a special place in, “the universal history of mysticism” (ibid, 361). Reacting to and against what he understood as a secular, modern Europe, Eliade sought a transcendental, universal sacred in all religions across cultures and time to arrive at a conception of, “a certain metaphysical ‘valorization’ of human existence” (Eliade 1959, xi). For Eliade, modern humans are preoccupied with what he called the, “terror of history”, that is, a fear of the uncertainties of a finite, temporal existence (McCutcheon 1993). In contrast, he believed that, “archaic” or primitive societies were closer to the timeless religious essence of the Sacred and had escaped the anxieties generated by the nihilism of modern history. Thus, his work on yoga must be read as a part of his oeuvre on religion which included shamanism and alchemy, all of which are seen by him as located within the “universal history of mysticism” and as providing the means for spiritual resuscitation since according to Eliade these are divorced from the modern, secular worldview.

As an academic at the University of Chicago from 1958 onwards, Eliade's writings had a huge impact not just on scholarly studies of religion but also on the popular quest in the United States in the 1960s for the non-modern authentic (Jenkins 2004). While scholars have contended amongst themselves whether or not Eliade's lifelong search for a transhistorical spiritual essence is reflective of his political conservatism (Dubuisson 2006; McCutcheon 1993; Rennie 1996), what is undeniable is that, “By reversing the traditional priority (of the technologically advanced West over the rest) through devaluing the technological, secular era in favour of what he described as the exemplary mode of existence found both in archaic and religious persons, Eliade assisted in bringing about an interpretive revolution that may very well have some of its rumblings in the now popular New Age movement” (McCutcheon 1993, 655).

For critical analyses of Eliade's conception of the sacred as universal to all religions, see Dubuisson (2006, 173-288) who is particularly critical of the ways in which Eliade uses his scholarly authority on religion for promoting anti-Semitic fascist ideals. A similar critique is offered by McCutcheon (1993, 1997) who critiques Eliade's ideas of *sui generis* religion. For earlier critiques of Eliade's hermeneutics, see King (1981) and Smart (1978) who argue that Eliade's approach to understanding the universal bases of religion is highly idiosyncratic and subjective with little substantive evidence.

many of the disenchanting youth turned to India because it embodied radical difference and was the mysterious, exotic other.

Unsurprisingly, many of my interlocutors, when they first travelled to India, had only a vague knowledge about the country. As Jerry said, “I was headed towards India [...] it was a land of mystery and charm that attracted me to it. I knew almost nothing about it”. To a great extent, it was still the unknown and the ways in which it was coming to be known through popular texts further exalted it as a land of mysticism. Much of India’s charm lay in not knowing it fully since it was the land of secret, ancient knowledge. While many may not have known much about India when they first went there, what they did know was what they did *not* want. This was brought out in a conversation that I had with Sally about her travels:

Me: I am trying to figure out how the sixties affected your search, spiritual search?

Sally: The consciousness changed so for many people there was no going back. It’s like putting on dirty clothes after you’ve had a bath, literally. There’s no way of doing that. So we have to go and find something. And depending on the individual there was more or less self-interest and more or less social aspiration to improve the world. And that would shift of course depending [...] we didn’t know but we couldn’t do anything further where we were, the people who went travelling. We weren’t running away, we were trying to find a ground where we could work on what needed to be worked on and we didn’t really know what that was and we were hoping that there would be some teacher. And also you have to understand it wasn’t so conscious but it was definitely there. You have to think that the chances of sitting for more than two seconds in the company of great people [with slight sarcasm?] in the West are not very much. You couldn’t just go and plop down in Isaiah Berlin’s¹¹⁰ sitting room. But in India for example and the Cultural Revolution in China and Tibet and these places, you could! All you had to do was turn up and be sincere, and some of them would tell you to get out, you were no good, and others would let you sit with them. And they, you were sitting in front of someone infinitely greater than you had ever hoped to meet. So, this was a huge thing. That’s what we needed; we needed, you know, some counsel.

Me: And that’s why you turned to the East?

Sally: Yes, of course. And also, where else?! What were we going to do?

¹¹⁰ Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) was an English philosopher, political theorist, and well known public intellectual, of Russian-Jewish origin, who wrote many of his major works during the 1960s and 1970s. At the time, in the flow of the conversation, it did not occur to me to ask Mary, ‘why Isaiah Berlin?’ But I can presume that his liberal ideas on individual freedom and identity might have endeared him to many at the time. Also, drawing on Vico and Herder, Berlin indicated that other cultures in (of) past ages comprehended life differently. His call to self-examination too would have been particularly appealing, “It is certainly a reasonable hypothesis that one of the principal causes of confusion, misery and fear is, whatever may be its psychological or social roots, blind adherence to outworn notions, pathological suspicion of any form of critical self-examination, frantic efforts to prevent any degree of rational analysis of what we live by and for” (Berlin 1978, 11).

Sally's narrative touched upon feelings of being lost that many of my other interlocutors also mentioned. At the heart of this predicament was the crisis of the self, and similar to Sally, finding a teacher or teachings that could address the disenchanted self, arose as a growing need of those travelling Eastward. At the same time, while it was clear what they did *not* want, as Sally said, what exactly one did want or expect was unclear to them. She expressed the sense of not knowing most poignantly when she said, "where else?! What were we going to do?"

There was clearly a sense of desperation and frustration with the society they grew up in that led my interlocutors to go elsewhere. In an earlier conversation, brewing a cup of coffee, Sally suddenly remembered reading an interview of an American guru in India. In the interview, the guru said something to the effect of none of them would be in India if not out of desperation. This reminded me of a conversation I had had with Kiran just a few days back in my guest house café where she told me that it was not so much the romance of someplace else as much as desperation with the West that drove them away. People are desperate to get away from their materialistic lives, Kiran said, which are empty and meaningless. Life without meaning is painful anyway, she went on, but it has gone beyond painful, for example, in the United States. Who would want to participate in a system that is bent on destroying the world because of its economic policies, she asked? So, the departure to India is not romantic, Kiran concluded, it is an act of desperation.

However, I found that often the refrain of frustration evident in Sally's questions was coupled with romanticism in the narratives of my interlocutors, when looking back at their earliest travels to India. They spoke of India as a place that mesmerised them because it was so different to anything they had ever seen or experienced before. For me, the anthropologist and listener, the narratives of hitting the road, of travelling for adventure, of going far and away seemed naïve and romantic. Struggling with my own critique of such narratives on the one hand, and my interlocutors' clearly genuine and deeply felt need to look elsewhere on the other, I decided to ask them if they thought that their turn to India or the conceptualisation of it as the "land of [their] salvation", as Jerry put it, was romantic and naïve. Sally said:

I think it was naïve. People of that age are naïve mostly except a few aren't because some of them have backgrounds which are not naïve. But I mean, for sure it was naïve. I mean in some cases it was a fad you know, a fashion. You could say the whole 60s was like that [...] A lot of people were the kind of people who would have done something like that even if it hadn't been the fashion, or they would have been hard put to fit in you know, quite a lot of it was like that [...] And of course romantic ideas.

Sally's self-reflexive reminiscence succinctly points to the ambiguities within which their earliest travels to India and the non-West was located. There was actively a seeking for an alternative to

their life in the West but what exactly that alternative was to be, to a great extent, was contingent on circumstances. As Sally said, crucial to their departure was the urgently felt need to look for *anything* as long as it was a new way of life. In another conversation Sally told me that if she had not met her gurus in India, she “would have gone on. I don’t know [...] Zen, Japan or something”. In these narratives, the distant exotic has a special appeal, that of symbolising the authentic which is barely known but intimately imagined as the solution to their problems precisely because, teleologically, it is not the home of the everyday. It is also this imaginary characteristic of the authentic, exotic other that allows gurus and Zen masters to stand in for each other insofar as they are radically different and distant, both physically and culturally, from their home society. The non-West, therefore, rises to the occasion, to begin with, because it is *not* the West. Negation of the West in this case immediately signals affirmation of the non-West. Yet, this other was accessible and available through historical exchanges and popular imaginaries as I have demonstrated above and in the previous chapter. Thus, the alternative that India and the non-West emerge as are both distant and intimate, different and accessible.

Hitting the road

One December evening in Pondicherry, on the terrace of her lovely house, a heritage French building, much of which has been restored by her friends from whom she rents, Sally started telling me why and when she first came to India:

Well we had links to India because my father ran [...] a propaganda film unit during the war, here in Bombay. It was a group of Indians and a couple of European people. And my godmother was a Hindu. But I didn’t come for that reason. I came because it was the end of the sixties. We had an outbreak in the sixties as you know. Our generation of people thought we had already arrived in a new world. So after that, there were basically three possibilities, one was going to communal farms to grow potatoes, one was to find a way to going back to finding a job and everything, and the other was to hit the road. So, we hit the road [...] I hit the road [...] and of course, looking for spiritual but at that point looking for anything, looking for adventure, a new way of life, place, people. It was no longer possible to be where we had been.

Like Sally, many of my other interlocutors “hit the road” to travel overland in the 1960s and 1970s in search of alternatives, radical difference, and breaking out of conventional, middle class American or European life. The overland trail passing through such exotic places as Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Nepal and Tibet, was, “already a narrative *before* the journey (was) undertaken” (Bishop 1989, 4), mythologising not only the places it led to and passed through but also the travellers’ personal biographies as they performed the *rite de passage* of travelling through Asia to find themselves. The overland route – in an age of relatively more porous national

boundaries, at least for those who could afford to take advantage of its porosity – “led from north-Western Europe to Morocco, Afghanistan, India, Nepal, and other points east. Tens of thousands of North Americans and Europeans travelled on it: some had their own VW vans, motorbikes or Land Rovers; some hitch-hiked; and eventually there were several dozen commercial companies who offered coach and minibus journeys along it” (Ireland and Gemie 2015, 1). Overland travel afforded the travellers opportunities of cheap transport and a neo-bohemian lifestyle, adding to the allure of the journey. Some of my interlocutors recalled sneaking into construction sites at night or in the doorway of houses to avoid renting hotel rooms. Certainly, as young people on tight budgets, avoiding renting hotel rooms and backpacking was a pragmatic way of saving money. But this style of travelling could only be experienced in places separated from their home countries by the long gulf of political and economic asymmetries, a space enabling the performance of voluntary poverty in an attempt to challenge affluence and consumerism back home.

Of course, not everyone travelling to Asia at the time did so with the political intention of critiquing consumerism. Many travelled to Asia simply because it was possible to travel there cheaply, starting the backpacker tourism trend. Tony Wheeler for instance, who founded the *Lonely Planet* with his wife Maureen based on their experiences of overland travel across Asia in 1972 and whose guide book *Across Asia on the Cheap* released in 1973 proved instantly successful, said about their budget travelling, “[w]e weren’t hippies, we just didn’t have any money” (cited in Kenny 2002, 115). Whatever their political intent and leanings, the early generation of predominantly middle-class shoe-string budget travellers had the economic and social capital to take advantage of the economic and political disparities between the global “North” and “South”. As a British interlocutor of mine recalled, “it was a good time economically in the West. So, people could take casual jobs, give them up, go travelling with very little money, get twenty pounds sent in the mail which you never got but anyway that was the idea. You could manage”.

While for many hippie trailers, India may have been just one stop among many, in the context of my interlocutors, India was their final stop since this is where many met their guru and began their long association with India¹¹¹. Kenneth used to volunteer in the *ashram* dining hall. As a volunteer myself, I had brief chats with him occasionally in the dining hall. I remember one time he mentioned to me that he came to India in the 1970s, “I was a hippie, no”. The line stuck but I did not get to talk to Kenneth at length during the trip. On my next visit though, I did get to talk to him

¹¹¹ However, the next chapter explores some of my interlocutors’ narratives of first encountering the guru in the West.

several times and in one of the conversations, Kenneth spoke of his hippie trail travels and his wide-eyed reaction to India:

Kenneth: I got here in '71, I think yeah, in fact '71 I arrived in India [...] I came overland through Great Britain. I went to see a friend in Munich well actually a tiny little town quite inside Germany, Canadian friend, he wasn't there, so stayed with a friend of his and then I caught the train, got to Munich and caught the uhhh Orient Express [we both laugh]. Took me right into Istanbul, I had been to Istanbul before, I loved it, loved the town. Then I started overland by bus, lots of little towns, things I wanted to see. I wanted to go to Konya. You know Konya?

Me: No

Kenneth: No? That's where, you know Rumi, the mystic? [me: yes] That's where his *ashram* was. He wouldn't call it an *ashram*, but you know what [Me: Monastery] I mean. So, I wanted to go there because I loved Rumi and I loved his spirituality. I went there, and I went to a few other places around, slowly crossing to Iran. It was interesting, nice trips, and I went to Afghanistan, eventually into Pakistan, and then India [...] I was young, twentyyy...one. Just turned 21. It's pretty young to be all over the world, travelling around, even in those days. I didn't have much money, just enough to sort of get by¹¹². Really, you won't believe the coincidence I had. I knew nothing of Holi¹¹³. And yet I went to Mathura on the day before Holi. I was in Vrindavan on Holi by chance. That is an amaaazing coincidence! Such an experience! Throwing water [and colours] all over the place! It was crazy! And I was walking down a small country road and an elephant comes with a sadhu sitting on top of the elephant with some people behind chanting and you go "whaaat?!" [opening his eyes wide]. I mean for a Westerner first time in India, ohhh. Nowadays people don't get that experience. It was special, really special.

Travel narratives like Kenneth's, as I found, are for the most part anecdotal. The anecdotes might seem peripheral to the "actual" narratives but I suggest that these are significant texts revealing the nature of their travels. They reveal instances most easily remembered and deemed most significant to merit recounting. The anecdotes relating to overland travel as in Kenneth's spoke of adventure, romance and the impending promise of something new. Recounting their journeys, my interlocutors would often tell me anecdotes that captured a high point in their travels. These anecdotes evoke enjoyment and mirth but most importantly they highlight the fact that these journeys into the enchanted outposts of the "developed" world were in pursuit of the experience of the real. It is interesting that although specific to individual biographies, they serve to capture the supposed essence of the place or time or their journeys through iconic images and situations. For instance, colours and elephant-riding *sadhus* invoked as emblematic of India juxtaposing, "The West's greyness and dullness [...] to the colour and chaos of the imagined East" (Sobocinska 2014). By

¹¹² This attests to the global economic asymmetries underlying cheap travel to the Third World, as discussed above.

¹¹³ The Hindu festival of colours.

contributing to the more widely circulating notions of India's radical difference, they consolidate the cultural discourse of the hippie trail as the route out of the disenchanted world into an enchanted and enchanting exotic world.

Sally, for instance, recalled crossing over to Turkey from the Bulgarian side:

It was very difficult, they wouldn't let us across because we didn't have any money. In the end we got in a bus with Lebanese people, they were on a tour of Turkey, and they put us, very sweet, they pretended we were on the tour, was fairly obvious that we weren't, one Lebanese woman lent me a head scarf, not a Muslim head scarf, just an ordinary one, probably a Gucci one or something [I laugh at that]! And we came across the border, I had been brought up in the Middle East, I probably told you, and so I was reeling, that smell of heavy scent, heavy scented flowers, slightly decaying food, and the call to prayer from the mosque. And I was like 'ohhhh' [in an appreciative tone] but that was because of my childhood. So in that way I felt oh yes, this is where real life has been going on all the time that I've been fooling around in Europe¹¹⁴ doing god knows what. The real thing has been going on here.

There were many such narratives that recounted an instance or a definitive moment of reckoning that one had "arrived" in a different but more real world. The real here is located in the elsewhere enabling the drawing together of places on an historically imagined and produced cartography of difference. The different places mentioned in these narratives are similar to each other when defined in terms of their essence of difference and authenticity, and yet they are not fully interchangeable due to the essentialist tropes that define them: the picture-postcard iconic representational equivalence of India with elephants and sadhus, and Turkey with mosques and Rumi.

Alex Owen (2004) writes, "The evocative term enchantment neatly captures the sense of the magical, the numinous, and a state of mind seemingly at odds with the modern outlook" (12). As the narratives show, India represents precisely such a space, in Jerry's words, "a land of mystery and charm" where the ordinary everyday life is radically different from the mundane life back home. In these narratives, India's affirmative qualities spring as much from its own traditions as from its opposition to the West in terms of the extraordinary nature of everyday life there. Everyday life outside of the West, as in the Middle East for Sally appears to be extraordinary – it is chaotic, it is sensuous, it is "real". For Sally it had a special significance because she had spent her childhood years in the Middle East, but the non-West as such – with or without childhood attachments - was, for most of them, life affirming (and I am presuming that is the import of Sally's equivocation of life "here" as "real") as opposed to the apperceived nihilism of Western, technocratic society.

¹¹⁴ Sally mentioned the name of the Western European city where she had grown up but in deference to her wish that I keep her nationality hidden, I have substituted the name of the city with the generic "Europe".

Amrita told me that when she emails someone from her house in India, she writes in the subject column, “planet India”! The recurring motif of alterity persists with the neo-oriental discourse of exoticism and reifies “strangeness” as if it were a self-fulfilling quality emblematic of India, instead of acknowledging strangeness as an affect of unfamiliarity and as something relative to one’s own level of familiarity with a given place or society. Strangeness is emergent in the relations we forge with them through our historical, social, economic and political positioning which informs what appears strange to whom, to what degree and with what effect (strangeness as intimidating, strangeness as endearing and exotic, strangeness as grating-on-the-nerves).

One evening Kiran said to me that she had been meaning to tell me something for a while now. She said just encountering India makes people, the Westerners that is, confront their selves and “that’s very spiritual”. As noted in Chapter 1, the emphasis on the individual self is at the heart of the discourse on spirituality. The synonymisation of knowing oneself is a recurring trope in New Age spiritual discourses and points to the fact that the collective turn Eastward, although meant to be in opposition to individualism, ended up exalting the same values that many sought to get away from. Kiran went on that some people come here looking for spirituality, some come not knowing what they are really looking for but encountering India presents them with deep ontological questions. India is so big, she said, so varied with its many languages, its food and its cultures. When people come from the West, they encounter this profoundly diverse, chaotic place, “You can’t put India in a box”, Kiran stated. Growing up in the West, she said, they get used to thinking and being a certain way. But then they come to India, “leaving behind their box and they say, ‘where’s the box here?’ There is no box! You just can’t grasp India fully”. According to Kiran, questions of “what am I, who am I, what does my life mean” become imperative when faced with the real, physical India and finding inner peace becomes a necessity there. The assertions of difference not only continually reimagine and reproduce India in certain ways but it also enables people to carve out and inhabit a liminal space within which they can recreate themselves as different. India is experienced as the simulacrum of an extraordinary other-world and by stepping into it the sojourners themselves undergo transformation, becoming someone different.

While India is perceived as mysterious, the West is rendered transparent, precluding an appreciation and acknowledgement of its own complexities. For Indians overseas, the West might seem confusing and strange. For instance, when I first came to Christchurch from Delhi, I found the silence around me astonishing and it took me weeks to be able to fall asleep in the absence of loud car horns, the blaring sound of television from neighbours’ houses and other such assorted sounds. But just how strange a place appears to be is not simply a matter of individual experience or

perceptions, strangeness is also a product of global structures. In an academic presentation in my university in New Zealand, when I presented my critique of the reification of India's strangeness, I was asked by a woman in the audience if that is not true of all travel and travellers. That is, when we go to a new place, do not we all experience that place as strange? I replied that certainly it is true to an extent and recalled my early experiences in New Zealand. But it was equally true, I pointed out, that I also experienced a sense of familiarity due to my fluency in English, engagement with Americanised popular culture in the form of pop songs, movies and contemporary fashion which are as prominent in New Zealand as they are among young, urban, middle class Indians, and through constant sign-postings of the West as the ideal of "development". Her question further reminded me of James Clifford's (1997) summary of the Indian anthropologist-turned-novelist Amitava Ghosh's recollection of his fieldwork in Egypt. Clifford writes about the story:

The tale's climax is an ugly shouting match between the researcher and a traditional Imam – a healer he hopes to interview. All the barbs about Hindu cremation and cow worship have begun to rankle, and before he knows it the visiting scholar is embroiled in an argument with the Imam. Amid a growing crowd, the two men confront each other, loudly disputing whose country is better, more "advanced". They each end up claiming to be second only to "the West" in possessing the finest guns and tanks and bombs. Suddenly the narrator realizes that "despite the vast gap that lay between us, we understood each other perfectly. We were both travelling, he and I: *we were travelling in the West*" (Clifford 1997, 4-5, emphasis mine).

As best as I could, but less eloquently than Ghosh, I tried to explain to the audience member that travelling to New Zealand did not present me with absolute strangeness for I had already, since my childhood, been travelling *in the West* in ways in which hardly anyone in the West would have been travelling in the East given the history and consequences of imperialism. Unfortunately, travelling to the East precisely for its difference does nothing to counter or at least acknowledge the historical production and structural embeddedness of these differences.

Juxtapositions

As noted, the notion of "lack" in terms of existential meaninglessness was central to many of my interlocutors' motivation to travel to India in search of deeper meaning in life. It was precisely this notion of lack which some of my Indian interlocutors responded to albeit from different perspectives. For instance, a local Pondicherian, Subhash, was very critical of Westerners coming to India for spirituality. I had been introduced to his wife through an acquaintance. When I reached their house, his wife had not yet returned from her work. But Subhash, their two daughters and the numerous colourful fish in an exquisite aquarium in their living room kept me company. Talking about the Westerners in Pondicherry, Subhash said they are "lost souls", people without a good job

and good family life. He said he is happy with his life, his job, his wife and children, and so does not need to go anywhere else. Subhash was right in pointing to dissatisfaction with life as many Western seekers' point of entry to India. But unlike him, my interlocutors did not seek satisfaction through a job and family. In fact these were precisely what they sought to leave behind. But whereas for many of my Western interlocutors, the pursuit of career and family *produced* the spiritual lack insofar as such pursuits were deemed "superficial", for Subhash it was precisely the absence of these which signalled real deficiency. Subhash's narrative serves as a counterpoint to many of my Western interlocutors' narratives of what constitutes lack. However, I cannot generalise Subhash's perspective to claim an "Indian" response to others' spiritual quest as existential lack is not solely a Western predicament. Similar issues are pertinent to middle-class Indians, participating in a rapidly globalising Indian economy.

For some of the urban, middle-class Indians I met in the *ashram*, very similar motivations were at play. A young woman from Delhi had given up her well-paying job in a transnational corporation and her busy lifestyle to become an *ashramite*. She spoke of the gnawing dissatisfaction with her career-oriented life and that she felt as if she was neglecting a deeper aspect of her self by simply being focused on career and money. With the Indian economy opening to the forces of globalisation and liberalisation since 1991 (see Chapter 5), middle-class Indians have emerged not only as consumers in the global market but also as active participants in the global discourse of spirituality, seen to offer a way out of the consumer-driven career-oriented logic of everyday lives. In Chapter 5, I will discuss some of my American and European interlocutors' responses to what they see as uninhibited consumption amongst urban middle-class Indians. Certainly, there were varied responses to "Indian materialism" by both my Western and Indian interlocutors. But there were also common themes emerging from my talks with several people. For instance, Jerry believed that it is a stage that must be gone through in the evolutionary process of higher spiritual development¹¹⁵. A French interlocutor, Pierre, believed that India is probably even more materialistic than the West but that, similar to what Jerry said, it is a phase that is inevitable.

Such narrative tropes were not uncommon among some of my Indian interlocutors who believe that the Westerners had grown tired of materialism and were looking for something more meaningful. In contrast, they felt Indians had not really enjoyed the fruits of a materially abundant life and that it was only natural to aspire to such a lifestyle. Again, there were variants to the theme. Some believed that spirituality is so deeply ingrained in Indian culture that those who want to turn to it

¹¹⁵ See the section titled "future aspirations" in Chapter 5.

can do so at any time. Others complained that the spiritual is ignored and overshadowed by increasing consumerism. Some, such as Harish, believed that it is only understandable that people want to fulfil their materialistic desires before spiritual seeking. Harish, born and brought up in India, went to the United States to study business management about 6 years ago. Subsequently, he worked as a successful banker in London, and was introduced to the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother by a friend. He said that from childhood he would ask his parents and family questions like “why are people born, where do they go after death” but no one could answer them satisfactorily. But when he started reading Sri Aurobindo’s *Life Divine*, he felt that all answers that he was looking for were there. Harish said he increasingly felt the deep urge to simply dedicate himself to following the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. He gave up his job and eventually came to Pondicherry where he is now associated with the *ashram*.

Interestingly, Harish did not mention a deep sense of dissatisfaction with his life in the United States and London as the instigator for a spiritual quest. He simply seemed to have become more interested in the Integral Yoga teachings and less and less interested in his career. The sense of lack that he suggested was the lack of meaning in “Indian pujas and stuff”. Since Harish had spent several years abroad pursuing career goals and then returned to India to lead an alternative lifestyle, I thought it would be interesting to ask him what he thought of people coming to India from the United States and Europe on a spiritual quest. Harish replied that:

Harish: I feel the Indians still have lot of things to achieve, materialistically, so they feel that ‘I want to live like a Westerner, once I realise that then I’ll see if I want to really search for God or not’. So, I feel that they are highly religious. But there is a big gap before they become spiritual. And that gap is actually materialism and enjoying everything that the world has to offer. Now in the West [...] frankly there is religion, Catholic, Christianity but what I feel is people there, materialistically they are fatigued. So, they are looking for something deeper [...] So, if you look at Eckhart, he’s got such a massive following of all kinds of people. And they are kind of trying to run away from the church because of all the scandals. So they are trying to find solace in like what Eckhart is teaching. So I find that a sense of spiritualism is actually more in the West because they are fed up with materialism, they are fed up with religion. And I would say yes, I would say the West, again it’s not generalised, I won’t say all across Europe, [but] there are pockets I feel [which] are much more spiritual than here.

Me: Because you feel their search is more genuine?

Harish: Because they have seen everything that life has to offer. At the physical level, they are satisfied as in they are fit, they are healthy, they eat good food; at the vital level, they have partied enough, they are tired of partying. Mental level, they are doing extremely intellectual jobs. So that layer is kind of satisfied. The only layer that is really lacking is their soul [...] The only layer that is not addressed is the deeper, psychic soul layer that is

being addressed now. That is the reason they are looking toward the East. That's my opinion.

Many of my Western interlocutors would concur with Harish's views of Westerners having fulfilled their materialistic desires, feeling fatigued with consumerism and, therefore, looking for something more meaningful. This takes us back to the notion of lack and the posited contrast of spirituality with materialism and of spirituality with religion. In her study of devotees of Amma, the female guru in Kerala, Maya Warriar (2005) notes that the bulk of Amma's devotees are middle-class Indian men and women who do not find satisfaction in following " 'mechanical' and 'ritualistic' religious observances and 'blind faith'" (13). Similar to Warriar's respondents, some of my Indian middle-class interlocutors such as Harish told me explicitly that they did not find answers to their existential questions in traditional religious rituals and piety. Instead, they, like many of my American and European interlocutors, sought a non-ritualistic approach to personalised spirituality. Warriar states that academic studies on guru movements in the West have pointed toward the emphasis in such movements on "the private and individual aspects of religious life" (ibid, 15). She continues, "what scholars have observed for the Western following of modern transnational guru organizations from India is in fact equally true of Hindu adherents in India. The religious faith that many such organizations foster in their largely urban, educated middle-class Indian following is of an individual, private and inward-looking variety" (ibid). Although, my research focus is primarily on Western seekers, the impressions gleaned from my talks with urban, highly educated, middle-class Indians concur with Warriar's argument suggesting that the discourse of spirituality has found ready adherents in the growing numbers of middle-class Indians in the face of rapid economic changes. The movement of Western seekers travelling to India in search of spirituality and that of Indian seekers returning to India point to interesting trajectories of movement – those from the West and those travelling *in* the West, as in the way in which Ghosh talks about the postcolonial elite, looking for the spiritual core in the non-West.

Conclusion

Indeed, a discomfiting affect is often what initiates a story, a claim, a thesis.

- Jane Bennett (2001, 3)

In arriving at something, what do we arrive at, and what is it we have departed from? These questions have been the underlying concerns of this chapter. People's journeys toward India, I have argued, were not simply conceived in a moment of impulsive spontaneity, although the pull to being impulsive might have characterised the 1960s youth's rejection of the financially secure,

comfortable middle-class lives that they were brought up in. Travelling to India, to far away non-Western places having the allure of the extraordinary was a significant aspect of turning away from things known and familiar. Journeys toward someplace are, thus, also journeys away from someplace else.

If space, as Doreen Massey (2005) argues, is always in the process of becoming, then I have argued, the processes of re-creating space are necessarily mediated via difference and disenchantment. It is because Western society is experienced as stultifying and disenchanting, with the worst pain inflicted on the self experienced as meaningless or without recourse to meaning within the present circumstances, that my interlocutors began their journey toward the non-West as the space of difference, and from disenchantment to re-enchantment. Travel anecdotes, stories of being on-the-road, and encountering India evoke a sense of wonder and enchantment.

The enchanted space of India comes to be constructed through spatial and temporal distance. It is at once far removed from the locale of the West as much as it is temporally distant through imaginaries of India as the space of ancient wisdom. Yet, the reification of the past is never complete or absolute as my interlocutors seek to move beyond it, as we shall see in the last chapter. The many tensions and contradictions that personal journeys to India are riddled with are also the journeys through which India is re-enchanted as the spiritual space par excellence.

Chapter 3. Travelling Westward: Place Enchantment and the Global Network of Indian Spirituality

Introduction

My parents were visiting me in Pondicherry for a few weeks. One overcast Sunday morning, I was chatting with them when the conversation turned to my mother's earliest encounter with a Hindu holy man. My mother had grown up in the North Indian city of Allahabad, an especially holy city for Hindus as it is situated on the *sangam* (confluence or merger) of three sacred rivers - Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati, a river mentioned in the Rg Veda as the "best of mothers, the best of rivers, and the best of goddesses" (Chadha 2011, 61), and which later Vedic texts mention as having disappeared (ibid). One of the most important Hindu religious "fairs", the Kumbh Mela, is organised in any one of the holy cities of Haridwar, Ujjain, Nasik, and Allahabad cyclically within a 12-year period. My mother said when she was a child, she and her siblings had gone with their mother to the Kumbh Mela organised in their city that year. Millions of pilgrims, *sadhus* and tourists congregate at the Mela. The year when my mother visited, a very renowned *sadhu* was camping at the Mela. He was a *naga sadhu* (naked sadhu)¹¹⁶, called Deoraha baba, and was supposed to have great spiritual prowess. Baba seldom gave *darshan* (sacred beholding) but one morning it was announced that he would appear for *darshan* after his ritual dip in the Ganges.

People were instructed to close their eyes¹¹⁷ when he came out of his tent to bathe and to chant a mantra. When finally the people were asked to open their eyes, Baba had already completed his ritual bath and was sitting atop an elevated platform constructed for him. My mother recounted that Baba's hair was piled high on his head in a massive bun. The people gathered were chanting the mantra he had given them and as a blessing he was throwing down fruits to the people. Whoever could catch one considered themselves very fortunate. "We were young, we were also trying to jump up and down to catch these fruits", my mother said. Then one Indian family, who my mother knew had been living abroad (maybe the United States, my mother said, but she could not be sure),

¹¹⁶ *Sadhus* of some *akharas* (organised bands of *sadhus*) such as the Juna *akhara* wander naked and are called *nagas*. Nakedness denotes high form of detachment from the world and *naga sadhus* are highly revered by Hindus. See MacLean (2008; 2009) for an account of *naga sadhus* at the Kumbh Mela.

¹¹⁷ As a sign of respect to the Baba.

arrived there with an instant Polaroid camera. Everyone was fascinated to see it, for no one had ever seen anything like it in Allahabad¹¹⁸. This family took some photographs of the Baba. The photograph came out immediately and people were amazed to see this. My mother said, “You won’t believe it”, but thereafter Baba started showering this family with an incessant stream of fruits completely ignoring everyone else.

I found my mother’s narrative interesting for the ways in which the East and the West collide in this story. For my mother, the *sadhu*’s fascination with the Western import of the camera and the camera-toting family expresses her disillusionment with the *sadhu*. Why would a supposedly detached holy man be so enamoured by a token of this-world? I will return to the topic of disillusionment with and critique of gurus later in this chapter. However, I want to extend the example of the *sadhu*’s enthrallment with the West. Taking liberty to read into the story, I contend that to the on-lookers and the *sadhu*, the West appears, in the form of the camera, as a place of extraordinary potential and progress. While in the *sadhu*’s case, the West stands for technological progress, recall that Indian gurus such as Swami Vivekananda posited that such technological progress had left Westerners spiritually vacuous. India, Swami Vivekananda claimed, had much to offer to Westerners in matters of spirituality. Since Vivekananda, many Indian gurus travelled to the West in order to reach out to wider audiences. Unlike Deoraha Baba who presumably had never travelled abroad, many Indian gurus not only travelled abroad but also marketed themselves and their spiritual wares in the West to those looking for an alternative to the church and Christianity.

In this chapter, I want to broaden the analysis of movement of Western seekers to India by situating these within circuits of crosscutting movements of Indian gurus to Western Europe and the United States. Arjun Appadurai (1996) argues that migration has changed the ways in which people imagine other people, places and cultures. Just as seekers from the West migrated to India for an alternative lifestyle in the 1960s and 1970s, so too did gurus migrate from India to the United States and Western Europe, reinvigorating the trope of spiritual India in global imaginaries. While some gurus were long-term migrants choosing to live abroad for the rest of their lives, others spent a few years in Western countries and then returned to India. Still others travelled to the West on tours, establishing centres there and initiating disciples into their spiritual lineage. Whether as short-term or long-term migrants, these gurus acquired a transnational following and for this reason I refer to them as global gurus.

¹¹⁸ This was sometime in the 1950s when India’s economic system had not yet opened itself to the forces of privatisation and liberalisation. Consequently, consumer goods like Polaroid cameras could only be obtained from abroad.

In the first section of this chapter, I will argue that gurus who travelled¹¹⁹ to the West in the 1960s and 1970s, constitute the transnational network or “global ecumene” (Hannerz 1989; 1992) of Indian spirituality. The second section, detailing the lives of Indian gurus in the West shows the ways in which they popularised their teachings, adapting traditional teachings to the needs of their international audiences. As nodes in the transnational network of Indian spirituality, global gurus were instrumental in extending modern, modified versions of Indian teachings beyond the geopolitical boundaries of India. At the same time, they led to place enchantment, that is, they recreated the image of India as the land of timeless spirituality. “Place” as I use the term here refers to the geopolitical territory of India conflated with an, “imagined world [...] constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe” (Appadurai 1996, 33).

Given the establishment of yoga centres and *ashrams* in the West, it is not surprising that for many of my interlocutors, the earliest interest in gurus or India as such – as the proverbial land of gurus and sages – was stimulated not in India but in their own or another Western country. In the third section, I shall discuss the ways in which some of my interlocutors arrived at Indian spirituality in the West, moving across various guru networks. However, while some of my interlocutors had their first engagement with Indian gurus in the West, others were motivated to physically travel to India in order to find their guru. In the fourth section, I look at their guru quest and the ways in which it fuelled geopiety for India. Lastly, I consider movements within the Integral Yoga network, looking at journeys of people and sacred matter (relics) across several nodes.

The transnational network of Indian spirituality

In *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (1996), Ulf Hannerz invokes Alfred Kroeber for his exposition on, “the global ecumene” (6-7). At the 1945 Huxley Memorial Lecture, Kroeber discussed the ancient Greek conception of the *oikoumene*, the conception of the total inhabited world which stretched from Gibraltar to India and China. Kroeber asserted that the ecumene, “remains a convenient designation for an interwoven set of happenings and products which are significant equally for the cultural historian and the theoretical anthropologist” (cited in Hannerz 1996, 7). Extending Kroeber’s ideas, Hannerz (ibid) argues that the contemporary world can be understood as the global ecumene that is, a world of interconnections, interactions and

¹¹⁹ However, as noted in the last chapter, some gurus became famous in the West without ever having travelled there in person. These gurus’ teachings were made popular through texts written by influential Western followers. Today, the internet plays a very important role in extending global gurus’ outreach among both, Western and diasporic Indian followers. But in this chapter, I mainly focus on gurus who physically travelled to the West in the 1960s and 1970s.

exchanges. In an earlier article devoted to the global ecumene, Hannerz (1989) argues that globalization had so far been studied in terms of economic and cultural dominance of the West on the rest or the, “centre upon the periphery” framework. Instead of such an approach, Hannerz (ibid) suggests that we understand the “centre” and the “periphery”¹²⁰ as engaged in processes of economic and cultural exchanges, exchanges which originate in the periphery and move toward the centre as frequently or with as much impact as transmissions from Europe and the United States to the rest of the world.

Hannerz’s writings, challenging the hegemony of the centre, can be seen as a rejection of the works of theorists such as Samuel Huntington (1996) who asserts that the West and the non-West are absolutely different in their polity and culture (including religion), so that the only outcome of their meeting can be, “the clash of civilizations”. In Huntington’s writings, the West stands for cultural and moral superiority, and there seems no possibility of the West and the non-West engaging in dialogue. In contrast, in the writings of Hannerz, the centre and the periphery are seen in terms of mutual cultural influence and impact. He writes:

A further issue, obviously, if one tries to arrive at a kind of present-day global cultural flow chart, is to what extent the peripheries indeed talk back; which would in large part be a question of the cultural influence of the Third World on the Occident. Reggae music, swamis and Latin American novels exemplify the kind of countercurrents that may first enter one’s mind; culture coming fully developed, as it were, from periphery to center, and at the same time culture which the periphery can give away, and keep at the same time (Hannerz 1989, 69).

Despite the much needed critique of Euro-America as the dominant transmitter of culture¹²¹ in the world, Hannerz’s conceptualization does not critique the binary model of centre/periphery as such. Rather, it simply reverses the transaction leaving the linear model of movement intact. In contrast, as Appadurai (1996) notes, the centre/periphery model must give way to more nuanced theoretical expositions of global flows which are, “complex, overlapping (and) disjunctive” (32). In her study of the transnational religious organisation of the Indian guru, Sathya Sai Baba (1926-2011), Tulasi Srinivas (2010) argues that cultural flows are in fact multidirectional. The Sathya Sai organisation

¹²⁰ I shall shortly discuss the limitations of a centre/periphery approach. I do not agree with the binary model of centre/periphery due to its linearity which is why I have mentioned the words in inverted commas. Henceforth, for convenience, I shall mention them without the commas but my use of the words should be read as being with reservation.

¹²¹ Globalisation is inextricably linked to the flow of capital, also intertwined with the history of colonialism and spread of capitalism in the non-Western world. While I am concerned with the ways in which economic asymmetries continue to play an important role in enabling flows of people and ideas within the framework of my thesis, my primary interest is in cultural flows albeit as intertwined with economic hierarchies.

has centres in India, the United States, England, Singapore, Japan, Kenya and Italy. Devotees from different parts of the world may congregate in different centres throughout their lifetime. Sathya Sai centres in India are pivotal to the Movement since these are some of the earliest established centres and where Sathya Sai Baba spent most of his time. The international centres too have an influence on Indian and other international centres through financial flows (donations) and cultural flows (devotees of different nationalities bringing their own beliefs and practices to the movement). Here one can see the movement of cultural flows which are clearly not linear. Also, feedback and cross-flows across the different centres transform what is on offer (spiritual teachings, in this case), such that culture cannot simply be “given away”.

Having said that, central to Hannerz’s (1992) idea of the global ecumene is the concept of “network”, comprising “related notions like flow, web and circuit” (D’Andrea 2007, 12). These notions are useful in analysing the global reach of Indian spirituality and explaining how many of my interlocutors first encountered gurus and *ashrams* in the West. I shall retain these terms and the idea of the global ecumene, albeit tracing cultural flows as nonlinear. Joost van Loon (2006) writes that “network” is a useful trope for, “conceptualizing non-linear complexes of structures and flows” (308), stressing, “fluidity, transformation and ambivalence” (310). He explains that a network comprises of three elements: nodes, links and mesh¹²². Nodes are the points where different links intersect, links in turn are the “most basic unit of the network” (ibid, 308) and the mesh, “is the overall structure, pattern and shape of the network” (ibid). Elaborating on these, Srinivas (2010) states:

The nodes of the network are where cultural congress and cultural translation occur. They are linked to one another sometimes through organizational and organized threads, such as the ordered tiers of executives at the Sathya Sai Seva Organization, or sometimes through fuzzy and unorganized threads, such as a network of Sai devotees of twenty nationalities who happened to be on the same bus that broke down in 1978 on the way to Puttuparthi and who subsequently began ten different Seva centres. (350n36).

Following Srinivas’s explication of nodes as points or sites of cultural engagement and translation or hermeneutics, I argue that gurus and *ashrams* can be seen as nodes¹²³ of a spiritual network. A particular guru and his or her *ashrams* or centres constitute the nodes of a particular spiritual

¹²² Castells, in his brilliantly conceived text on “networks” wrote that, “A network is a set of interconnected nodes” (1996, 470). I believe that Loon (2006) builds on this conception to talk of the three elements of a network. I follow Loon in my work since it provides a more elaborate idea of the network.

¹²³ As is evident in the chapter, gurus are mobile. In my understanding of nodes, then, these do not have to be fixed to enable cultural engagement. If anything their mobility enables them to acquire devotees or followers from a wide range of cultural backgrounds thus enabling more intense and diverse crosscultural encounters.

network. For instance, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and Sri Aurobindo *ashram* in Pondicherry along with Sri Aurobindo centres elsewhere can be understood as nodes in the Integral Yoga network. These nodes are linked through ties of money, devotees and objects (such as guru photographs, texts written by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and texts written by devotees on them). Similarly, the Sathya Sai network can be thought of as another network. But networks are non-linear (Castells 1996), therefore, it is impossible to tell where the network ends especially because new nodes and links may emerge over time. The disciple of a guru might go on to found his or her own spiritual network which claims allegiance to the guru but simultaneously maintains distinctiveness. For example, Sri Chinmoy, a follower of Sri Aurobindo and Mother, established several Chinmoy centres in the United States and other parts of the Western world. Although influenced by the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and Mother, his own spiritual network proliferates in the world today¹²⁴.

The different networks taken together, I contend, constitute the global ecumene that is the “network of networks” (Hannerz 1992, 51) of Indian spirituality. Even as the metaphor of network underscores fluidity and heterogeneity, a given network might belong within a wider network (ibid). Different spiritual networks contribute to the sustenance of a still wider spiritual network of gurus and *ashrams*, claiming their teachings and practices to be representative of India’s spiritual heritage. In the following two sections, I proceed to look at global gurus who brought Indian spirituality to the world and the ways in which encountering them ignited some of my interlocutors’ onward journey to India.

Indian gurus in the West

In Chapter 1, I discussed Swami Vivekananda’s participation at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Subsequently, Vivekananda founded The New York Vedanta Society which was the first major step in attracting upper-middle and upper-class Americans to Indian spirituality (Jackson 1994, 29). Between June to August 1895, Vivekananda chose a few disciples whom he trained in meditation techniques and deep breathing at a retreat in Thousand Island Park in New York (de Michelis 2004, 121). From among this group, two American devotees initiated by Vivekananda as sannyasins (renouncers) were some of the earliest Western initiands in a (neo) Hindu movement or organisation (Jackson 1994, 30). Vivekananda was, thus, seminal to promoting neo-Hinduism as a universal religion.

¹²⁴ I return to Sri Chinmoy in the last section of this chapter entitled “the Integral yoga network”.

Following Vivekananda, other Indian gurus¹²⁵ travelled to the United States as a form of outreach to the West. Another charismatic guru who had a profound impact on Americans in the 20th century was Swami Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952). He went to the United States in 1920 where he stayed until his death. Yogananda founded the Self-Realisation Fellowship in 1920 in Los Angeles, a thriving organisation today with several branches in the United States, Europe and Asia. Yogananda stated that yoga (specifically, *kriya* yoga which emphasised postures and breathing practises) and meditation were the techniques of realising one's true self. He said, "Yoga is a simple process of reversing the ordinary outward flow of energy and consciousness so that the mind becomes a dynamic center of direct perception—no longer dependent upon the fallible senses but capable of actually experiencing Truth" (Yogananda cited in Farge 2009). *Kriya* yoga was based on simple, easy-to-follow techniques and, "its promise of speedy, painless progress" (Trout 1998, 136), made it especially appealing to Western audiences not yet very familiar with yoga practices. Yogananda promoted yoga as a universal religion well suited to the needs of every man and woman in the dark times of the war years, "The shadows of approaching carnage were lengthening over the world [...] During interviews with thousands in California, and through a world-wide correspondence, I found that men and women were deeply searching their hearts; the tragic outer insecurity had emphasized need for the Eternal Anchorage" (Yogananda 1946¹²⁶)

Yogananda also emphasised the scientific nature of *kriya* yoga. He stated, "Kriya Yoga is a simple, psychophysiological method by which the human blood is decarbonized and recharged with oxygen. The atoms of this extra oxygen are transmuted into life current to rejuvenate the brain and spinal centers" (ibid). Harmonising science and religion, also apparent in Sri Aurobindo's teachings (see Chapter 1), Yogananda countered both secular ideas of religion as irrational, and colonial stereotypes of Hindu religion and India as non-modern.

Sarah Strauss (2002a) notes that Vivekananda onwards, gurus have relied on print technology to publish and disseminate their teachings in the form of inexpensive pamphlets and printed literature. Yogananda received phenomenal popularity in the United States with the publication of his book, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946) written in English. Talking to my interlocutors, I found that the book continues to be popular among spiritual seekers. It is one of the first books that many of them had read on Indian spirituality. As Polly Trout (1998) mentions, *Autobiography* became, "a countercultural classic, and helped lay a foundation for the subsequent blossoming of American interest in yoga and meditative practices in the 1960s" (15). For Dennis, one of my American

¹²⁵ See Trout (1998) for the gurus who travelled to the United States between 1900 to 1950.

¹²⁶ Online edition <https://www.crystalclarity.com/yogananda/chap48.php>

interlocutors who travelled overland to India at the end of the 1960s, the book was his first connection to India. Dennis told me that as a child he visited a bookstore in the United States with his mother where he spotted the book with Yogananda's picture on it. He asked his mother, "Who's that? What's a yogi? What's reincarnation?" His interest in India was piqued by the book. It did not occur to me to ask him then if he did eventually read the book or not, but I presume from our conversation that the cover portrait of a long-haired, ochre-robed Swami Yogananda had ignited his initial interest in India.

Another afternoon, in the beautiful courtyard of a French heritage building converted into a restaurant, Amrita fished out a book from her shoulder bag. She had been browsing through a bookshop at the corner and exclaimed to me, "look, what I found!" It was a second-hand copy of *Autobiography*. She said she had read the book many years ago in the United States during her early foray into Indian spirituality, and chancing upon it now made her want to revisit the book. *Autobiography* can be considered a significant example of Indian guru texts reaching out to a broad, transnational audience. Here, I am influenced by Benedict Anderson's (1991) seminal work on the nation as an imagined community and the role of print media in augmenting the idea of the nation as a coherent whole in collective imagination. Extending Anderson's ideas, Appadurai (1996) argues that media has had a tremendous impact on instilling "the work of the imagination as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity" (3). Following from that, we could contend that *Autobiography* facilitated, and still facilitates, a collective imagining of India as the land of great, wise beings and eternal mysticism.

Through *Autobiography*, readers are taken on a whirlwind tour of India where miraculous stories in which, "gurus levitate, raise the dead, live for hundreds of years, bilocate, read minds and materialize palaces", are presented along with a, "philosophy of yoga that is a brilliant mixture of tradition and modernity [...] rearticulated for the consumption of modern masses" (Trout 1998, 132). Yogananda writes at length about his family's guru, Lahiri Mahasaya of Benaras, who in turn claimed to have been visited by Babaji, a mythical guru who is said to be hundreds of years old and living in the Himalayas. When Yogananda travelled to the United States to spread the teachings of Lahiri Mahasaya, he said that Babaji had appeared to him to bless him (Yogananda 1946). Throughout the book, Yogananda (1946) refers to Babaji as a "Yogi-Christ", and writes that Babaji and Christ are forever in communion with each other, working together toward the goal of human perfection and salvation.

Through his ingenious mix of Hinduism (yoga) and constant references to Christ and the Bible, Yogananda brilliantly creates a cartography of gurus and yoga traditions in India without losing its focus on the intended Western audience. A global community spirit is fostered throughout the book but finds its most explicit expression toward the end of the book when in talking about his Self-Realisation Fellowship institute in California, Yogananda refers to himself as a “world citizen”. The phrase would turn out to be applicable to several other Indian gurus who established their centres in various parts of the United States and Europe, and acquired mass transnational followership. Vivekananda and Yogananda, “first wave gurus” to the West (Forsthofel and Humes 2005), were instrumental in invigorating the image of the guru as spiritual master and as representative of India’s spiritual heritage, posited as a universalist spirituality ready to embrace willing learners of any nationality and religion.

The war years saw a lull period in the movement of Indian gurus to Western countries. This changed with the 1965 amendment to immigration laws in the United States lifting quotas blocking Asian immigrants, allowing many Indian gurus to travel there¹²⁷. Following the amendment, Indian gurus once again began travelling Westward. Gurus who travelled to the West are in many ways distinctive, “whether [...] expressed through a particular method, product, philosophy, appearance, sanctity or charisma of the guru” (Lucia 2014a, 221). For instance, Maharshi Mahesh Yogi (1918-2008)¹²⁸ established Transcendental Meditation (TM) as a unique global brand of meditation. Born and brought up in India, Maharshi went on several world tours between 1959-1968 during which

¹²⁷ Various national and international factors contributed to these changes in immigration policies. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s was one of the factors contributing to the push toward ending race based discrimination. However, international politics might have played a far greater role in inaugurating these changes. Newly independent countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, “sought to delegitimize racism through the United Nations and other, particularly Pan-American multilateral institutions” (Fitzgerald and Cook-Martin 2015). Further, in the face of the Cold War, America needed the support and cooperation of these newly independent countries. The changes in its immigration laws were thus reflective of the changes in its foreign policies which sought alliance with Asian countries. In 1952, the United States President Harry Truman, “created the Commission on Immigration and Naturalization in 1952 to hold hearings on immigration reform. Its report, *Whom We Shall Welcome*, formed the outline of the 1965 act. It called for abolishing the national-origins quotas, particularly ‘racist provisions’ toward Asians and Caribbean blacks. The rationales for these changes included the ‘democratic faith of our own Declaration of Independence in the equality of all men’ and an affirmation that ‘the best scientific evidence available today’ shows that ‘the basic racist assumption of the national origins system is invalid’” (ibid). Liberal humanist values coupled with the pragmatism of foreign policies eventually led to the new immigration act being passed in 1965.

¹²⁸ For detailed scholarly treatment of Maharshi including his rise to fame in the United States and England, establishment of TM, and subsequent return to India, see Aravamudan (2006, 232-247); Humes (2005). For Maharshi’s reception in the United States and his portrayal in American popular culture, see Iwamura (2011, 63-110).

time he gained several followers in England and the United States. Maharshi and TM received much publicity in the 1960s, owing to his brief association with the Beatles in 1966. Maharshi's association with the Beatles and film stars such as Mia Farrow catapulted him to fame in the United States so that, "By the end of 1967, the *New York Times Magazine* declared him, 'The Chief Guru of the Western World', and in 1968, *Life* magazine announced 'The Year of the Guru'" (Iwamura 2011, 64). One of my German interlocutors, Johann, who came to India for the first time in 1980 in order to visit Auroville, remembered Maharshi through his Beatles association. Johann said that in the 1970s and 1980s, Indian gurus had become quite popular in Germany. In the 1970s, he continued, the Beatles made one particular guru very well known. "Maharshi Mahesh?", I prompted. "Yes, yes", Johann affirmed.

Maharshi marketed TM to his American audiences as a scientific technique of stress-relief as well as self-realisation. Instead of a devotional, religious attitude, Maharshi emphasised freedom of choice and personal fulfilment through TM. He asserted that TM was very simple, and that anyone could learn it. It needed simply a few minutes' practice every day, although it had to be learnt under the guidance of a trained teacher (Maharshi Mahesh Yogi, talk given at Trocadero Hotel in Sydney on 30 November 1967)¹²⁹. Sally remarked in one of our conversations that until Maharshi, there had been hardly any well-known teachers in England and the United States teaching how to practice meditation and yoga in a systematic manner. She said, "Now you can do yoga anywhere. But it wasn't true in the West (in the 1960s). There was nobody to help you follow a path (of yoga), maybe one or two private people but there was not much until Maharshi came".

Elena, a German interlocutor, also mentioned that Maharshi was the first yoga guru whom she heard of in Germany. Elena had travelled to India for the first time in December 1973 for a few months. At that time, she was not interested in yoga or gurus, and her trip to India was recreational. But after returning to Germany, she began attending a meditation centre in Stuttgart near her house where they taught TM. She said she found it very enjoyable, and it initiated her interest in yoga and Indian spirituality. Elena could not remember the name of the centre, but it is a fact that Maharshi had himself trained several people to be TM instructors who then went on to train others and established TM centres in different parts of the world (Humes 2005, 64). Maharshi was successful in appealing to wide audiences by claiming that TM was not religion, "And that is why in the world today, people of all religions are enjoying meditation [...] So, this is no teaching of religion, but it

¹²⁹ Transcript available here <https://www.mum.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Transcript-Maharshi-Sydney-edited.pdf>

brings the light of religion according to one's own faith and beliefs" (Maharshi Mahesh Yogi, 30 November 1967). The religious ecumenism of global gurus such as Maharshi captured multiple audiences through its easy translatability across cultures, fitting well into the broad-brushed strokes of Orientalist imaginings regarding Eastern spirituality and the youth's search for cultural and religious alternatives to mainstream values.

Another global guru mentioned to me by my interlocutors was Swami Muktananda¹³⁰ (1908-1982). He founded the spiritual path known as Siddha Yoga ("perfected yoga") based on Kashmir Shaivism, a system of nondualist Tantric Shaiva doctrines and practices. Muktananda went on 3 world tours between 1970 and 1980 establishing several Siddha Yoga centres in the United States and Europe. He also established the practice of initiating followers through *shaktipat*, that is, awakening the latter's dormant *kundalini* energy¹³¹. Whereas Maharshi insisted that TM was not

¹³⁰ For academic accounts of Muktananda and his teachings, see Caldwell (2001); Healy (2011); and Williamson (2005). I must note that Maharshi and Muktananda are just two of many gurus who became well-known in the West in the 1960s and 1970s. In this list we could include, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada (1896-1977; International Society for Krishna Consciousness), Guru Maharaj-ji or Prem Rawat (b1957; Divine Light Mission), Swami Rama (1925-1996; Himalayan Institute), and Gurani Anjali (Patanjali Yoga). However, I have restricted myself to Maharshi and Muktananda since they were the most commonly mentioned gurus by my interlocutors.

Further, there were many differences between the teachings of each of the gurus mentioned above. Prabhupada seems to be the most traditional of the global gurus, emphasising traditional caste and gender rules and demanding intense devotion to Krishna (Goswami and Gupta 2005; Lucia 2014a). Geaves (2009) argues that Rawat exemplifies the North Indian tradition of the *Sant* - a lay holy man who claims to have no magical powers or yogic authority but, "implies an iconoclasm that breaks the bounds of tradition while maintaining an emphasis on the inner experiential dimension" (24). Swami Rama promoted Saṅkara's Advaita Vedanta as a scientific form of yoga and claimed to be following in the footsteps of ancient Himalayan sages (Bruner 1996). Gurani Anjali, in her teachings, combined Patanjali's classical doctrine of yoga and *Samkhya* philosophy (system of dualism of soul and matter), and Hindu folk stories (Chapple 2005). Despite these differences, as argued in the chapter, the gurus shared the common feature of proselytising and adapting Hinduism to a wider audience. It is these generic features which I have discussed above.

¹³¹ *Shaktipat* has been described in medieval Kashmir Shaivism texts as, "the 'descent of grace' which awakens a type of spiritual energy called *kundalini*" (Williamson 2005, 150). Until awakened, *kundalini* is depicted as a coiled serpent lying at the foot of the spine. One awakened through *shaktipat*, this energy 'uncoils' and "rises up the spine [...] until it reaches the highest subtle energy centre" (ibid). *Shaktipat* is described as a rare occurrence in scriptures, and descriptions of what exactly it entails is in veiled language (ibid). *Shaktipat* was supposed to occur suddenly. It is said that Muktananda received *shaktipat* one day when he looked into his guru's eyes and felt as if an unbroken stream of energy was being transmitted to him through his guru. As discussed above, Muktananda adapted to his audience and bestowed *shaktipat* on them in collective two-day retreats where people, "practiced meditation, chanted, and listened as Muktananda spoke about *kundalini* awakening and the path of practice or *sadhana* that they were to follow" (ibid, 152).

reliant on the authority of the guru, by contrast, Muktananda's initiation practice of *shaktipat* was a way of formally invoking the blessing of the guru. Thus, in Siddha Yoga, the guru continued to occupy a central role.

Sally narrated hearing about a conference held in the United States in the 1970s (she could not remember the exact year or city and seemed to be recounting hear-say) which Muktananda had been invited to. At the conference, Sally said, Muktananda gave *shaktipat* to the audience. She continued, so powerful was Muktananda's *shaktipat* that "they (the audience) were all (trembling – she shows this with gestures), (they thought) 'what was that?!'" While the date and venue of the conference may be vague, Sally's anecdote clearly points to Muktananda's, "religious innovation" (Lucia 2014a). Traditionally, *shaktipat* was meant to be conferred on a disciple by the guru only after years of spiritual practice, once the disciple was ready to receive initiation. However, Muktananda abandoned such requirements, not only giving *shaktipat* to novices but also in large collective gatherings to everyone present there. In this way, Muktananda tailored his practices to suit a wide range of people¹³².

Despite the uniqueness of each guru, the multitude of gurus appealed to Western audiences because of their willingness to highlight and adapt those streams of Hindu metaphysics that allied most closely with the beliefs of their non-Indian, non-Hindu potential followers. Global gurus combined and adapted traditional maxims, beliefs and practices, usually a juxtaposition of Advaita Vedanta and *bhakti* (interiorised devotion), with the liberal modern values of universalism, ecumenism and individualism. For example, most gurus did not insist on religious conversion of their followers¹³³. Instead, the gurus emphasised personal sincerity, individualised relationship with the guru and commitment to a personalised spiritual path. Initiation rites such as Muktananda's *shaktipat* neatly captured a market for individualistic, niche protestant inspired spirituality. Gurus also overcame injunctions of caste as regards travelling overseas and in accepting disciples, who as non-Hindus, had no caste identity. This was a remarkable democratization of Hindu practices where traditionally "lower" caste people or those outside the ambit of the caste structure (the "untouchables" and non-Hindus) could not become either disciples or gurus¹³⁴. This modern democratic characteristic marks

However, whether or not everyone gathered felt the "transference" of energy from Muktananda to themselves is open to questioning (ibid; see also Williamson 2010).

¹³² See the next section on Amrita's first meeting with Muktananda.

¹³³ In this, Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada was an exception. He insisted on conversion. However, as Lucia (2014a) notes, this traditionalism might be one of the reasons for its popularity among the Hindu diaspora.

¹³⁴ However, caste injunctions were challenged by the Bhakti movement (roughly from 6 to 18 CE) where poet-saints from lower caste backgrounds came to be venerated. The poet-saints' personal devotion to a deity

what Joanne Waghorne (2010) refers to as, “de-ethnicized Hinduism”. Following David McMahan’s work on Buddhist modernism, Lucia (2014a) argues that 20th and 21st century Indian gurus have reinvented Hinduism to fit the needs of people in the, “globalized world of late capitalist modernity” (222). Instant initiation, quick methods of meditation and yoga, and promotion of particular brands of yoga as unique products¹³⁵ are evidence of such adaptations.

Global gurus have had a tremendous influence on the rise of ecumenical religiosity which seeks to speak across cultures and nations in the language of, what Aravamudan (2006) calls, “Guru English”. It is, he says, a modern register of, “new religious meanings” (ibid, 6), whereby, “despite very specific doctrines and particular circumstances that are unique to individual teachers, there seems to be a nebulous system of valuation and transcoding that interanimates many of them for the religious consumer” (ibid, 268). I brought up the aspect of commercialisation with my interlocutors. I asked a German woman, Angela, if she thought that the various gurus, in her view, represented a spiritual marketplace? No, she replied, “That’s why people come to India, not because it’s a supermarket but (because) India is well known all over the world as a spiritual country by itself”. However, as I have been arguing, the movement of gurus to the West, did much by way of disseminating this “well known fact” about India. Another interlocutor, incidentally also German, Gunther, said that commercialisation achieved the task of proliferating information about various gurus to a wider audience – a veritable “yoga industry” (his phrase) - important for those genuinely seeking a spiritual teacher. The aspects of commercialisation and genuine guru quest are intertwined, he indicated. I shall discuss this further toward the end of the next section in the context of guru choice and movement across gurus.

Transitions in personal journeys

Many of my interlocutors first encountered Indian spirituality in the form of gurus and yoga even before they travelled to India. However, these early encounters, for most of the people I spoke to, did not necessarily result in a singular commitment to a particular guru. For some, the guru-nodes were important in initiating their interest in yoga in general. Elena is a case in point. TM made her aware of Indian spirituality but she never considered herself a follower of Maharshi. A dentist in Stuttgart whom she was acquainted with had travelled to Sri Aurobindo *ashram* and Auroville in

and their easily accessible vernacular language challenged the hegemony of elite and priestly classes. For example, Mirabai, the medieval Krishna bhakta accepted the untouchable poet Ravidas as her guru, and Auvaiyar, a 12th century woman poet-saint belonged to a low caste thus challenging both gender and caste proscriptions (Lucia 2014a, 229-231)

¹³⁵ See Johnston (1980) for a critical examination of TM marketing strategies.

the 1970s. Impressed by what he told her, Elena returned to India in 1975, travelling to the *ashram* in Pondicherry and subsequently becoming an *ashramite*.

Some of my other interlocutors have deep reverence for the first guru they met, but have also moved across several guru networks. Networks are open systems and insofar as different guru networks constitute the global ecumene of Indian spirituality, there seems to be little contradiction in moving from one node to another within the same network, or from one guru network to another. Movement across networks also attest to, what Robert Wuthnow (1998) calls, the shift from spiritual “dwelling” to “seeking”. No longer content with established notions of the sacred, liturgical practices and religious institutions, “people (in the United States) have been losing faith in a metaphysic that can make them feel at home in the universe and [...] they increasingly negotiate among competing glimpses of the sacred, seeking partial knowledge and practical wisdom” (Wuthnow 1998, 3). Whereas to dwell is to find order and meaning in given religious structures and practices, to seek is to go beyond the, “model of habitation, of groundedness and clear boundaries locating the sacred [...] (to) search for new teachings and practices, including often eclectic combinations, promises to uncover fresh meaning and new moorings” (Roof 2003, 138). Roof (ibid) further says, “The first (spiritual dwelling) conveys an image of settled life, the second (seeking) that of a journey”. On the following pages, I explore narratives of such journeys undertaken by seekers.

Where traditional pilgrims journey to the centre of their given religious world (Graburn 1989; Turner 1973), seekers leave behind old centres of meaning in search of new ones. In the words of David Lyon (2005), “New identities are sought that appeal to life, personal freedom, and creativity, and that seek emancipation [...] from transcendent principles and community rules” (51). In the next chapter, I will discuss my interlocutors’ narratives of departing from Christianity because of their dissatisfaction with the church and liturgical practices. Instead, they were in quest of alternative religious practices and beliefs (although not recognising these as religious). For them, modern Indian gurus and their *ashrams* emerged as new centres¹³⁶ of meaningful, faith-based worldviews, albeit often constituting one element of an eclectic mix of beliefs and practices. The narratives of Kiran and Amrita demonstrate such journeys of spiritual seeking.

For a 7 year period between mid-1970 to early-1980s, Kiran travelled as a backpacker across Africa, Asia, Europe, and then ended up in New Zealand where she was “wwoofing”, that is,

¹³⁶ I am extending the notion of “centre” from a physical site to the embodiment of valued ideals.

working as a volunteer on organic farms¹³⁷. While working on an organic farm in South Island, she heard of a Buddhist monastery near Nelson and did her first meditation retreat there. It was the first time that she had participated in a spiritual community and got guidance from an ordained teacher, a monk in this case. Once her New Zealand visa expired, Kiran made her way to Australia and subsequently joined an *ashram* which was connected with a prominent school of yoga in India¹³⁸. The *ashram* in Australia, Kiran said, “was a biiiig, very thriving yoga *ashram* [...] hundreds of people came there, they had 30 branches around Australia, it was huge”. The founder of the Indian school of yoga, which the Australian *ashram* was affiliated with, visited the Australian *ashram* a few times during the 6 years that Kiran spent there. He initiated Kiran into his spiritual lineage with a personal *mantra*. Following the initiation, Kiran taught yoga (postures, meditation and breathing techniques) in the *ashram*, nearby community centres, prisons, and disability centres. However, there emerged allegations of sexual abuse against the chief swami of the Australian *ashram*, following which Kiran left the *ashram* and travelled to India. Because of what had happened in the *ashram* in Australia, Kiran said, “I didn’t even feel comfortable continuing in the Indian *ashram* that was connected with it”. Instead, she went to:

Bodh Gaya and did a Vipassanā¹³⁹ retreat, not the Goenka retreat but another group called Insight Meditation¹⁴⁰. I don’t know if you know of that and they had a big meditation centre in England and I spent almost a year there [in England] [...] So, I was going in for an interview one time and I saw a photograph of Ramana Maharshi¹⁴¹ and I was just, I was transfixed¹⁴². You know that picture of him and I just felt this is somebody who knows the truth. And the teacher was so sweet for the interview, she was waiting and waiting and she saw there I was just staring at the photo and she said ‘come in, I have an address for you’. There is someone in India still living who was with him when he was alive. So she sent me back to India to Papaji, that was her.

¹³⁷ See <http://www.woof.co.nz/>

¹³⁸ I have kept the details sketchy to protect her identity.

¹³⁹ Vipassanā, translated as “insight”, is a form of Buddhist meditation (see Gethin 1998). S.N. Goenka (1924-2013) started one of the earliest Vipassanā meditation retreats in 1969, offering a ten-day intense meditation course. See the website of Vipassanā Meditation as taught by Goenka <http://www.dhamma.org/en/>

¹⁴⁰ In the flow of the conversation, I forgot to ask Kiran which Insight Meditation centre she was referring to. There seem to be several Insight Meditation centres all over England. In an email conversation, I tried to clarify this with Kiran. However, in her email to me, Kiran had mentioned that she would soon be travelling to Australia. I did not hear back from her regarding my query and I presumed that she must be busy with her travels. I, therefore, thought it best not to bother her about it again.

¹⁴¹ See previous chapter on Ramana Maharshi.

¹⁴² See next chapter for photographic encounters explained through *karmic* recognition.

Kiran spent the next 7 years in Lucknow, India, as a disciple of H.W.L. Poonja (1910/1913-1997), affectionately called Papaji by his disciples. Papaji¹⁴³ was a prominent disciple of Sri Ramana Maharshi, and many Neo-Advaita gurus and organisations claim to be influenced by him (Lucas 2011, 94). Papaji gave Kiran the Indian name which she goes by now. After Papaji's death, many of his disciples including Kiran moved to Thiruvanamallai, home to the *ashram* of Sri Ramana Maharshi, because of Papaji's association with Sri Ramana. Again, Kiran spent around 6 to 7 years in Thiruvanamallai. At the time of my writing this thesis, Kiran divides her time between Pondicherry and Thiruvanamallai. Although respectful of Integral Yoga teachings, Kiran is mostly interested in Advaita Vedanta and spends time in Pondicherry because she enjoys the sea breeze, a welcome change from the land-locked Thiruvanamallai, and has some acquaintances associated with Sri Aurobindo *ashram*.

It is interesting to note Kiran's circuitous journey to India and to Sri Ramana Maharshi. Her first encounter with Indian spirituality took place in Australia, thousands of miles away from India. The Indian affiliated *ashram* in Australia, both recreated India as a spiritual place by emphasising its Indian yogic lineage – which explains why Kiran went to India in the aftermath of the scandal despite being uninterested in joining the Indian affiliated *ashram* - and expanded the frontiers of spiritual India by making the teachings available in Australia. Kiran's disillusionment with the Indian school of yoga prompted her toward a Buddhist meditation network with branches in India and England, the latter sending her back to India to join another transnational spiritual network – that of Papaji and by extension, Ramana Maharshi. The non-linearity of networks, thus, allows for movement from one spiritual network to another: from the Indian Yoga school to Insight Meditation to Advaita Vedanta. Further, Kiran can be seen to be moving across different nodes (Papaji and Sri Ramana) within the Advaita Vedanta network. The openness and fluidity of these networks accord well with New Age spiritualities where one is free to maintain flexibility in one's chosen faith-based practices and lifestyles¹⁴⁴.

To give another example of movement across transnational spiritual networks, Amrita, of Jewish-American ethnicity, first heard of Swami Muktananda in the United States. One evening in 1977,

¹⁴³ Poonja met Ramana Maharshi in 1944. On meeting him, Poonja claimed that he had achieved self-realisation in the presence of Ramana (Gleig 2013, 191). Like Ramana, Poonja also taught that self-realisation needed no scriptural or institutional authority. Poonja had a small group of Indian and Western followers but became prominent among Western seekers when the American Andrew Cohen wrote about him in *My Master is My Self* (1989). For a discussion of Cohen's relation with Poonja, the impact of Cohen's book, and eventual fall-out with Poonja, see Gleig (2013).

¹⁴⁴ See below for guru choice

Amrita happened to meet a woman she knew from before, in a Los Angeles park. The acquaintance told Amrita about a one-day intensive course in the *ashram* of Swami Muktananda. “What’s an *ashram*?”, Amrita asked her. She had no idea what *ashrams* were. But because she trusted the neighbour, Amrita went to the *ashram* with her husband. Although Muktananda was not present himself, Amrita was profoundly touched by his teachings disseminated by one of his disciples in the *ashram*. A year before, Amrita had had mystical experiences which she likes to call “the awakening”. Amrita said that it was as if suddenly a whole new dimension had opened to her. It was like god speaking to her personally, she said. Thoughts of a metaphysical nature occurred to her spontaneously over 3 weeks which she wrote down in a bunch of notebooks. Like many of her generation, Amrita was not interested in the church or biblical exegesis (see Chapter 4). Rather, she emphasised personal experience of the divine. Moreover, Amrita explained that her awakening had the result of turning her not toward Hinduism or India but toward her Jewish lineage. In particular, Amrita found spiritual inspiration in the Kabbalah. Although, as Amrita said, her experience did not generate her interest in Hinduism as such, when she learnt of the Siddha Yoga teachings in Muktananda’s *ashram*, she felt that these resonated with her own mystical experiences. She said that the “way of the Siddha”, the path of perfected yoga made absolute sense to her since these taught that anyone could become spiritually realised in this-world, “through one’s connection to something larger” (Williamson 2005, 159) than one’s everyday quotidian existence.

Thereafter, Amrita travelled to India in June 1979 to visit “Baba”, as Muktananda is known by his devotees, in his *ashram* in Ganeshpuri. After spending a few months in the *ashram* in India, Amrita returned to the United States where she continued to visit Muktananda’s California *ashram*. Amrita reveres Muktananda as her first guru, but since Muktananda’s death in 1982 she has moved across various spiritual networks. She has visited several gurus, and while with some the “connection” has been temporary, there are other gurus and *ashrams* she visits frequently. Meher Baba is one of them.

Following her marriage to an Australian man, Amrita became an Australian citizen. In the early 2000s, Amrita was staying for some time at a meditation retreat centre in the Sunshine Coast in Queensland. During her stay at the centre, Amrita felt unwell. Some people at the centre suggested to her that she go to Meher Clinic¹⁴⁵ which was not far away. At the clinic, she was attended to by a doctor couple who asked her about herself, her interests, why she was staying at the monastery and so on. Finding out about her spiritual interests, they asked her if she had been to the “Abode”.

¹⁴⁵ See the clinic website <http://www.meherclinic.com.au/>

“What Abode?”, Amrita asked them in surprise. As it turned out, she said, at the end of the street was a big, beautiful property dedicated to Meher Baba. Meher Baba (1894-1969)¹⁴⁶ was an Indian guru of Zoroastrian descent who claimed to be an “Avatara of this Age, that is, the current manifestation of five previous major Avataric Advents—Ram, Krishna, Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed—who are one and the same” (Sanjines 2014, 125). Meher Baba visited the United States and Europe beginning in the 1930s and Australia in the 1950s. Some of his Western disciples established “Avatara’s Abode”¹⁴⁷ in Queensland in 1958 just prior to his visit to Australia. Visiting the Abode in Queensland was Amrita’s first encounter with the Meher network. She wanted to visit his tomb at the Meher Baba Pilgrim Centre in Ahmednagar in India. However, in the wake of the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September in 2001, Amrita did not get the chance to travel to India until January 2002. As I write this, Amrita has been living in Pondicherry for the past 1.5 years during which period she has visited the Pilgrim Centre a number of times.

For Amrita, there is no contradiction whatsoever in moving from the Siddhya Yoga network to the Meher Baba network and to other guru networks. Despite not being a devotee of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, she holds the Mother’s Jewish lineage and esoteric teachings in high regard. Typical of spiritual seekers, Amrita employs an eclectic range of teachings in her personal spiritual repertoire, uncovering “new moorings” (Roof 2003, 138). This flexibility of movement is characteristic of modern spiritual networks (Warrier 2003). Emphasis on the personal, experiential bond between oneself and the guru, and relatively less emphasis on the notion of the community as such creates a “‘floating population’ of adherents whose guru loyalties are likely to shift and change over time” (ibid, 34). This is certainly the case for Amrita, a participant in the networks of Muktananda and Meher Baba, but not a member of the core organisational and administrative group formed of devotees closest to the guru (in which situation, due to their power and prestige in the organisation, the possibility of movement or even the desire for going to another guru would be significantly reduced).

As I had mentioned in Chapter 1, in the context of Sri Aurobindo followers, despite being a part of the *ashram* many consider themselves as simply inhabiting a loose group of like-minded people instead of envisaging themselves as part of a tightly-knit institution, testifying to the currency of the

¹⁴⁶ Meher Baba was known for the vow of silence he took in 1925 which he maintained till his death in 1969. Meher Baba’s insistence on silence can be regarded as having spiritual significance insofar as silent contemplation is seen as an important method of spiritual development. On Meher Baba’s silence, see Sanjines (2014). Also see Chapple (2005, 17-18); and Kerkhove (2003).

¹⁴⁷ <http://www.avatarsabode.com.au/>

“spiritual but not religious” idea. Secondly, death of the guru is also a significant event, following which devotees may find themselves at a loose end and feel the need to look for guidance from another teacher. Then again, even when the guru is alive, disillusionment with the organisation can impel people to seek elsewhere.

These personal transitions, however, would not be possible without the “spiritual marketplace” (Carrette and King 2005), or the phenomenon of “spiritual shopping” (Wuthnow 2007), where people can choose those gurus who serve *their* emotional and spiritual needs best, or fulfil the “lack” that another guru cannot. As Lyon (2000) argues, the privatisation of religion means that, “people are free to choose on their own what to do with their time, their homes, their bodies, and their gods” (81). The spiritual eclecticism of some of my interlocutors, demonstrated in the form of guru choice and movement across different guru networks, can be seen as a form of cultural consumption in which the needs of individuals are sought to be met by both seekers and gurus. Even as many, between the mid-1960s to early 1970s¹⁴⁸, left their countries to break away from the individualism which was an anathema to them, the search for *their* guru and for alterity was oriented to the self, framed by the same ethos which they wanted to leave behind. Colin Campbell (1987) argues that modern capitalist consumerism is animated by the (antimodern) romantic ethos of , “qualitative individualism” (ibid), that is, the quest for self-discovery and realisation of one’s true worth. The right guru is meant to facilitate self-realisation in accordance with one’s values and ideas centring, “on a restless individualism [...] in an ever-changing market of consumable objects and experiences” (Howard 2016, 9).

However, as I shall review in Chapter 4, spiritual seekers actively try to curb self-aggrandisement, mitigating their ego by “surrendering” to the guru who is accepted as infinitely greater than them. As I shall also discuss, the notion of choice is likewise abandoned in the discourse of being “called” by the guru, where the disciple herself is seen to have no choice in response to the guru’s call. Further, it points to the guru’s authority in choosing the disciple, overshadowing the latter’s agency to choose. These discourses point to the ways in which new religious identities are forged within

¹⁴⁸ I must mention here that Amrita herself never expressed any countercultural critique in her narrative. I once asked her if she had turned toward India, like many of my other interlocutors, as part of the 1960s counterculture. In a matter-of-fact tone, Amrita said, “I never had the chance”. Amrita had got married at about 21. Before that she used to live with her parents and she, for one, did not seem to have been much affected by the collective going-ons of the time. In response to my question about the influence of the counterculture on her, she explained, she had lived a very sheltered life with her parents and when she moved out of her parents’ home for the first time, it was as a young wife. Consequently, she said, her journey to India was not really influenced by the countercultural critique of the West. Nonetheless, Muktananda’s travel to the West gathered popularity and support in the wake of the wider countercultural critique of Christianity.

consumer choices redefining what it means to be a religious consumer. As Lyon (2000) further argues, “more consuming does not necessarily mean less sacred” (83).

Yet, the notion of choice cannot be overlooked in the seekers’ quest for the “right” guru which is responsible for the ways in which disciples view the prototype of the guru. As Amrita once remarked, “Without the audience, who is a guru, what is he? Nothing”. It is the disciples, she said, who through their adoration and adulation make the guru who he is – a guru. Even though, in a guru-disciple relationship, the disciple is meant to unquestioningly follow the guru – a principle all my interlocutors agreed with- given the availability of guru choices, disciples have more power than ever to exercise their agency in terms of giving up on a guru and going to another. As several scholars have noted, consumerism generates new desires, thriving on the sense of loss which propels people to continuously look for new means of gratification (Bauman 2007; Howard 2016). According to Zygmunt Bauman (2007), “The life of a consumer, the consuming life, is not about acquiring and possessing [...] It is instead, first and foremost, about *being on the move*” (98, emphasis in original). A phenomenon not lost on global gurus themselves.

Worldly wise gurus who travelled to Europe and the United States realised the significance of the mass media and consumer culture in spreading their message. Newspaper and magazine coverage, branding meditation techniques, and sale of merchandise like cassettes and video tapes (now CDs) with the guru’s messages became popular methods of reaching out to a wide audience. Thus, Srinivas Aravamudan (2006) argues that although, “Vivekananda had insisted in the nineteenth century that Vedanta went hand in hand with socialism, today”, gurus and the global guru network, “is very well ensconced in, and even relies on, the consumption patterns of late capitalist consumer culture” (231). In saying this, admittedly, I am making a generalisation. Just as there were gurus who became famous and acquired celebrity status, there were at the same time many other gurus who remained reclusive and few people knew about them. However, the high visibility of well-known gurus enhanced the guru *figure* that is, the trope of an enlightened being, with the overall effect of re-enchanting India as the proverbial land of sages and seers. Gurus like Maharshi Mahesh Yogi, although exemplary of the celebrity guru, prohibited followers from choosing or shifting to other gurus, “insisting that followers either love him or leave him” (Humes 2005, 73). In this case too, while ardent followers may have been discouraged from experimenting with other gurus, the spiritual marketplace ensured that should they choose to do so, there would be other potential avenues for them. Karen Pechilis (2004) points out, “In the 1960s and 1970s, the context of the mass marketing of the guru was the veritable marketing of the mystic East, with India and Indian gurus as a dominant product. Young Americans travelled to India in search of an alternative

lifestyle, some more spiritually inclined than others” (33). It is this guru quest which I explore in the following section.

Guru quest and geopiety

Srinivas (2010) writes, “An international cultural need to find in Indian spirituality an opposition to Western rationality and greed led to a spiritual seeking in India as an expression of zeitgeist. Hundreds if not thousands of young Americans and Europeans came to India to find *their* guru” (11, emphasis in original). The physical movement of gurus and the virtual movement of ideas and teachings coupled with increasing attention by the mass media created place enchantment, fuelling the guru quest of many seekers which took them to India. Gurus and their teachings – whether disseminated through their own travels, disciples or texts - while creating something distinctive to tailor the needs of different audiences, simultaneously reproduced the allure of India as the founding ground of their spiritual lineage. As nodes in a transnational spiritual network, they helped in expanding the boundaries of India beyond its geo-political territory, at the same time “localising” their spiritual inheritance in the trope of spiritual India.

Dotted with *ashrams* and gurus, some well-known, some obscure, India had and continues to have an enchanting appeal as a guruscape. However, as Sally also pointed out, it is not as if everyone who travelled to India was actively or deliberately seeking a guru, “some people were looking to see if they couldn’t find somewhere to have a business or find some [...] They just went to see a guru because they happened to be passing but there was no distinction. Other people who then fell for the guru, some of them were the ones who fought to get to the guru and there were ones who were just passing and they went ah, you know, no harm in it”. Kiran mentioned that initially she did not, “trust gurus and *ashrams*. I thought, who knows, I don’t want to get involved with a cult”. Having been with several gurus and teachers, Kiran does not anymore regard them *en masse* as cult leaders. But given her experience at the *ashram* in Australia, she does continue to be wary about trusting gurus.

Referring to the word “guru”, Amrita would often say, “*gu* means darkness, *ru* means light [...] the guru has both packages”. Amrita’s interpretation is slightly different to the etymology of the word “guru” which means dispeller of darkness. But her explanation captures the idea that a genuine guru is the epitome of everything good whereas a cunning charlatan or an ego-driven guru could very well be the biggest obstacle to realisation. Often in recounting their stories of meeting gurus, my interlocutors would add a note of caution that one had to beware of power-hungry gurus, “the nonsense mongers”, as Sally put it. Scandals surrounding gurus related to property frauds and

sexual abuse are not uncommon. As Kirin Narayan (1989) notes, the ideal guru is supposed to be selfless and above human failings. Possession of property and craving for sex are seen as signs of moral depravity as these purportedly bolster a person's ego making them selfish rather than selfless, and are thus contradictory to the traits of a guru (ibid, 85). Certain traditions of Hinduism such as Tantra do involve ritual sexual intercourse. While Tantra includes a wide range of practices which may have nothing to do with sex, nevertheless practitioners of esoteric, socially transgressive Tantric practices have often been viewed with suspicion and derision by lay Hindu society. However, popular Tantra gurus in the 20th century have done much to decontextualise and oversexualise Tantra (Urban 2003).

One evening, Yvonne and I were chatting in my guest house garden when Amrita came by. Yvonne and Amrita got talking about gurus and the conversation veered toward Osho who had reached the peak of his spiritual career in the 1970s, setting up an *ashram* in Poona which became known for its lenient, permissive attitude toward drugs and sex. The "Sex Guru", Rajneesh, later known as Osho, became immensely popular with an international audience. His attempt to, "create a religious path that could magically combine the enjoyment of sexuality, the pursuit of wealth, and the goal of spiritual transcendence" (Urban 2005, 170) made him popular with certain sections of spiritual seekers. Urban (2005) argues that Osho transformed Tantra from, "a highly esoteric and elaborate ritual tradition into an extremely popular and widely marketed spiritual commodity for a Western audience" (177). However, it is this very oversexualised spirituality that kept Yvonne and Amrita away from him.

Regarding the negative views about Osho, Yvonne says that early in her travels in India, she visited a Krishna *ashram* in Poona and, "they said, yeah, there's this Rajneesh but he's not a good guru", which deterred Yvonne from visiting him. Amrita, who had never met Osho but had, in fact, rented a little caravan in an Osho community in Australia agreed with Yvonne, "When I came to understand the way that path was, I was like 'woww', that was a protection for me because if it had got hold of me, I would have never, never recovered". Gurus, as she had said earlier, can be as much dispellers as harbingers of darkness. However, both Yvonne and Amrita also said that Osho may have proved to be a suitable guru for some people. Amrita would often say that just like gurus attracted disciples, disciples attracted gurus depending on their proclivity. Such narratives attest to the intimate nature of guru-disciple relationships where not only are gurus and disciples inter-dependent (despite the hierarchical nature of the relationship where the guru is supposed to have

absolute authority over followers), but also such interdependence is believed to have been forged over previous lifetimes¹⁴⁹.

Despite misgivings, “the guru *principle*”, as Amrita explained in another conversation, is not something that she had issues with, “it is like if you want to be a surgeon you have to go and study with people who know how to do an operation. So, if you want to excel you have to go to the experts, (it is)the same on the spiritual path”. In principle, then, gurus continue to represent an ideal. Indeed, in deviating from the ideal, gurus like Osho reinforce it, for, “the very accusation that someone is a *pakhandi* or a *dhongi* (i.e. fake) guru rests on the assumption (and reconfirms as fact) that real or true gurus do exist” (Copeman and Ikegame 2012, 297).

For many of my interlocutors, looking for a guru or an *ashram* embodying the ideal guru principle was the primary motive of their travels to and within India. For Sally, there was a serious, deliberate seeking of gurus. She recounted:

We wanted to find an *ashram* or something, I went to Rishikesh, there was [I prompt, ‘to Sivananda¹⁵⁰ *ashram*?’] Yeah but he [Swami Sivananda] was already out of the body. He was already gone and he hadn’t been gone very long. And there were like three foreigners there in the summer. And that was very nice, people were very kind, we asked what do we do and there was this swami [says a name, ‘....or something’]. We did our thing, we had *darshan*, there was one Narayananda who was very big in Scandinavia and Denmark, and he

¹⁴⁹ See Chapter 4.

¹⁵⁰ Swami Sivananda (1887-1963) was born in a distinguished Tamil Brahmin family. After living in Malaysia for 10 years as a practising doctor, he returned to India and became a *sannyasi* (renouncer). In 1936, he founded the Divine Life Society in Rishikesh which is a flourishing network today with centres across the United States, Europe, Australia, Canada, Malaysia and South Africa. Sivananda was pivotal in popularising Rishikesh as a yoga centre through publications of inexpensive books and pamphlets, and sending emissaries from his *ashram* to other cities and countries on lecture tours (Strauss 2000; 2002a; 2002b). However, before establishing his own *ashram*, Sivananda had spent several years living in a modest cottage in Svarga *ashram* in Rishikesh and here Mircea Eliade met Sivananda (Bordas 2007). Eliade went to India in 1928 to study classical yoga texts. After spending about 2 years studying Indic philosophy with the philosopher Surendranath Dasgupta in Calcutta, he went to Rishikesh in 1931 to practise yoga. In his autobiography, Eliade (1981) makes explicit albeit sporadic references to Sivananda. He writes that while staying in Svarga *ashram*, he “liked to converse with Swami Shivananda” which helped in reinvigorating his “appetite for philosophy and Sanskrit” (189). He also mentions that he practised yogic meditation techniques “under the guidance of Shivananda” (ibid). Later, Eliade (1982) referred to Sivananda as his guru (41). Although Bordas (2007) disputes this claim by saying that Eliade spent only very brief periods of time with Sivananda, Eliade’s self-professed association with the Indian guru is well-known in accounts of Sivananda’s life and in the broader history of modern Indian yoga (Strauss 2000).

was there with one of his disciples and it was very nice [...] and then we came down, and we were looking, looking.

As Sally had remarked (see previous chapter), it was precisely the search for a teacher or guru (“we needed some counsel”) that had led her and many of her generation to India. Citing Burke O. Long, Grimshaw writes geopiety is, “that curious mix of romantic imagination, historical rectitude and attachment to a particular place” (2008, 143). Elsewhere, in the context of spiritual travel, he notes that the geopiety of exotic travel revolves around notions of the elsewhere, that which is different and authentic because it is not here (Grimshaw 2013, 546). The India of gurus and *ashrams* is the subject of such geopiety. Gurus and *ashrams* embody the radical difference of India in the sense that they are seen as following in the long tradition of seers and sages symptomatic of ancient Indian wisdom, or in Jerry’s words, “the spiritual tradition in India”.

In the quiet of his office, Jerry, narrated this story to me in his usual ebullient manner:

I’ll tell you a story, an Indian story. I show up there [Sivananda *ashram*] one morning and say I would like to stay here if it’s possible. The *brahmachari* [bachelor student] said, “You’ll have to see Swami Chidananda, he’s downstairs in the dispensary. Go down the staircase” [...] I go down these lovely wooden steps, nearby is this dispensary and there’s already half a dozen people there waiting to see the swami who’s inside attending the sick people. And I look there and I see this man in the ochre robes, slim and tall, leaning on a staff and immediately he reminded me of Christ for some reason. Anyhow, so I just looked in and watched him [...] He came out after 5 minutes. By that time there is a dozen, fifteen people around, and immediately a couple of people leapt forward and bent down to touch his feet. And Swami Chidananda stepped back and reached down and lifted one lady up by the shoulders and looked at her and gave her a smile. And someone else tried to touch his feet and he stepped back like this and swami lifted this person up and said a few words. And then the young *brahmacharis* and the swamis who have to get his instructions or have him sign something came forward [...] and I just watched all of this. And saw that this guy was being overwhelmed. But he wasn’t overwhelmed. He was like here in the eye of the storm just the centre of peace. [Laughs lightly] Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. This guy was composed [...] and then at last my turn came. So he looked up at me. And I said I would like to stay here if I could [...] He said “can you please come up the stairs with me”. So I’m walking beside the swami with all the other people around you know [laughs], there are a dozen or about fifteen people behind [...] ok, we get to the staircase and for some reason I look down and I saw on the bottom step of the staircase a fly which was right at the spot where the swami had put his foot. I saw this. And then Swami Chidananda stopped. He also saw the fly. And he slowly reached down his right index finger and put it beside the fly. The fly walked on to his finger, he lifted up his finger and put it on the wooden railing to his right. The fly walked off his finger. He withdrew his finger and we proceeded up the steps. All this took about fifteen seconds maybe and I’m not sure that anybody behind even saw that happen. Anyhow, I thought “yeah, this guy’s got peace”.

For Jerry, after more than 40 years of living in India, the romantic enchantment as well as a sense of gratitude (for finding a guru in India) persisted, especially when looked at through the lens of his

early experiences in India such as the one in Rishikesh. For him, his Rishikesh story is “an Indian story” because, apart from people touching the *swami*’s feet (a Hindu practice of conveying reverence) and the presence of *brahmacharis*, this captures the apparently humane spirit of India, embodied in Swami Chidananda’s deep-rooted “inner peace” and his compassion, even *ahimsa* (non-violence), toward the fly. Jerry thought that Swami Chidananda, “was a realised soul. And I think he was exactly the kind of person that India makes. See? He followed his guru honestly. I believe he went to the end of the way”. Swami Chidananda, to Jerry, exemplifies India and its spirit as seen in his moral-ethical qualities, inculcated from following in the footsteps of his guru. Thus, this too is a narrative of geopiety anchored in radical difference. But what parallels and points of disjunction can we draw between the geopiety of exotic spiritual travel reverential of India as such and that of Hindu pilgrimage?

Geopiety or topophilia, that is, “Human being’s affective ties with the material environment” (Tuan 1974, 93) is central to Hindu pilgrimages or *tirtha yatra* (Singh 2005). Diana L. Eck (1981), in her classic study of India’s *tirthas*, argues that, “One of the oldest strands of the Hindu tradition is what one might call the ‘locative’ strand of Hindu piety” (323). That is, geographical locations or formations like mountains, rivers, seas, rocks and forests are, “the primary locus of devotion” (ibid). Of these, some waterfronts or rivers like the Ganga are considered to be most significant and religiously powerful. The word “*tirtha*” itself means a “crossing” or “ford”, “where one may cross over to the far shore of a river or to the far shore of the worlds of heaven” (ibid). Often *sadhus* and *sannyasis* camp close to holy rivers like the Ganga. As mentioned before, the Kumbh Mela is always organised in a city situated on the banks of a river. In addition to rivers, mountains like the Himalayas also draw a considerable number of Hindu pilgrims each year (Singh 2005), which, of course, is popular not only among Hindus and Buddhists but also reserves a very special place in the wider spiritual discourse of orientalist and romantics who exalted the Himalayas as a truly spiritual place (Bishop 1989; Howard 2016).

I contend that the geopiety of enchanted places like India straddles topophilia and simulation (Baudrillard 1994). For many of my interlocutors, as Sally said to me once, there is something in the very land of India which they see as imbued with spirituality. Simultaneously, topophilia or geopiety in this case is the affective attachment to an imagined, mythical space, the mythology of romantic Orientalist creation. There is a combination of love and reverence for the territorial space of India – thus, the travels to its location which one of my interlocutors referred to as “*yatra*” or pilgrimage – with the love for an “imaginative geography” (Bishop 1989) of spiritual India. This spiritual India is a hyperreal India generated, “by models of a real without origin or reality”

(Baudrillard 1994, 1). Pilgrimage to the India of *ashrams* and gurus is pilgrimage to a modern sacred space which is a simulacrum of the ancient past. The anti-modern ethos finds its resolution not in the pre-modern past but in its simulation. The India that my interlocutors travelled to was the India which stood for “the eternal path” as one of my interlocutors suggested, where the symbolic itself is taken to be the truth of India in the here-and-now, a simulated present day spiritual India which *is* the past. Baudrillard writes, “When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning” (ibid). Building on Baudrillard, Appadurai (1996) argues that for (elite) populations of postindustrial nations, “the past is usually another country” (31). I shall take up the themes of nostalgia again in chapter 5. Quest journeys from the “First” to the “Third” world signify not only travels to a spatially distant land, but must also be seen as journeys into an apperceived temporal elsewhere. How India manages to stay true to its essence of timeless purity is something that is exhibited below as we go back to Jerry’s Indian story.

Jerry’s narrative needs to be located within his wider perceptions and experiences of India. He would often tell me that he finds India to be a “very humane place”. When he first told me this, I reacted with incredulity, “you do?!!” My trip to Pondicherry in December 2014 was still overshadowed by memories of a horrific gang rape of a young medical student in Delhi about a year ago. As the girl had lain in a hospital fighting for her life, protests against the brutal crime erupted in the city and in other parts of the country. That someone could be treated in such a manner – she had been penetrated by a metal rod and her intestines pulled out - filled us protesters with outrage, hopelessness and disbelief. It was in this context that I found Jerry’s statement hard to agree with. To my response (I did not mention the rape to him), Jerry replied that certainly I could take objection to what he was saying “because when you look at how women are treated, how children are treated [...] it’s gotta be undeniable [...] There’s a lot of pretty bad things going on here. But I still find deep down among people, there’s a lot of friendly, happy-go-lucky people of good will and understanding”. In his romantic emphasis on the essence of Indianness, Jerry was probably more an exception than the rule. For some of my other interlocutors, India was as good or bad as any other place, for still others outside of their spiritual commitment to an *ashram* or guru there was not much to keep them in India. Even those who enjoyed everyday life in India often spoke of its discontents as well. Thus, it was not as if everyone, always, viewed India in a highly positive light. In fact, as another American *ashramite* told me, the rose tinted glasses come off after a few years of living in India as life becomes more mundane and loses its exotic sheen. But precisely in the face of India’s everyday chaos, the extraction of oneself from Indian city life and the rejection of Indian modernity seems to be imperative in the pursuit of timeless spirituality.

In Chapter 5, I will discuss the ramifications of the extraction of one self from the everyday life of India in greater detail. While on the one hand, *ashrams* are meant to be spaces of insulation and retreat from the outside world of pain, grief and mundane existence, on the other, such insularity in the context of global asymmetries where some people can withdraw themselves from the everyday world with more ease than others does have political implications for and within the creation of a transnational spiritual community. Withdrawal from the West in this case entails a double rejection, the rejection of the West as well as rejection of the everyday Indian modernity in favour of an alternative modernity, albeit expressed as the desire for the premodern and timeless. It is from the safe confines of such alternative spaces that one can express faith in India's essential goodness or humanity. In saying this, I am not trying to assert the opposite of this claim, but it needs to be considered that perceptions of timelessness obscure the myriad social, economic and political heterogeneity constituting India.

In Jerry's narrative, even as the guru embodies and conveys difference, this difference is also obliterated or managed within an interpretive framework of transnational spirituality which uses a universalist vocabulary of love and compassion. Jerry's first impression of the *swami*, as he tends to the sick and infirm, is that he is Christ-like or perhaps *is* Christ for Jerry in that moment of remembrance, dissolving ontological boundaries between the *swami* and Christ. It is not surprising that Jerry's expectations of Indian gurus and *ashrams* to fulfil a detheologised and gnostic spirituality could be met by Swami Chidananda. On the one hand, it speaks of the seekers' expectations and personal backgrounds which facilitate in the reinterpretation of neo-Hindu teachings, on the other, Christianity as such and the figure of Jesus in particular have been evoked time and again in the discourses of 20th and 21st century gurus¹⁵¹.

As previously noted, Yogananda makes constant references to Babaji and Christ in his *Autobiography*, essentially considering Jesus an *avatar*. Amongst the gurus who became popular post-1965, many expressed their message as being compatible with that of Jesus. The Beatles' John Lennon said of his meeting with Maharshi Mahesh Yogi that what the latter, "says about life and the universe is the same message that Jesus, Buddha and Krishna and all the big boys were putting

¹⁵¹ It is interesting to note that in the late 19th century, a text, supposed to be the translation of, "an ancient Buddhist manuscript referring to an 'unknown life of Jesus' in India created a heated controversy" (Joseph 2012, 161). The author of the alleged translation, Nicholas Notovitch, was not the first European to argue that Jesus had spent some years in India. Previously, other Europeans had claimed that Jesus had spent the duration of time known as, "the lost years", in India, a claim that, "emerged within a European fascination with the 'mystic East' and the 'ancient wisdom' of India" (ibid, 163). Joseph (2012) further points out that several Indian gurus, including Paramahansa Yogananda, have endorsed the view that Jesus lived in India.

over” (Lennon cited in Aravamudan 2006, 242). For his part, Maharshi Mahesh Yogi claimed in a collective gathering, “I love Jesus very much [...] ‘Find the kingdom that lies within you’, I think is the main teaching of Christ and therefore Transcendental Meditation (TM) which takes the awareness to that level which Christ wanted every Christian to have, it is only a friend of Christianity, TM is a friend of Christianity” (1971)¹⁵². In Maharshi’s vocabulary, Christ appears to be removed from overt religious underpinnings, instead presenting him as a good teacher and realised soul. Later, by the end of the 1970s, Maharshi would start emphasising Vedic religion as the, “most accurate vision of true religion” (Humes 2005, 72). Nevertheless, he was adept at offering TM within a universalist discursive framework to his international, Christian-background audience.

In Sri Aurobindo’s writings too, one finds references to Christ as an *avatar*. In *Essays on the Gita* (1997c), Sri Aurobindo writes, “The divine manifestation of a Christ, Krishna, Buddha in external humanity has for its inner truth the same manifestation of the eternal Avatar within in our own inner humanity. That which has been done in the outer human life of earth, may be repeated in the inner life of all human beings” (160), and further, “the inner descent of the Godhead to raise the human soul into himself is the main thing,—it is the inner Christ, Krishna or Buddha that matters” (167). Thus, Christ, Krishna and Buddha, are all seen by Sri Aurobindo as embodiments of the divine principle. To his devotees, Christ and other religious figures appear to belong to the same lineage of great teachers and prophets of which Sri Aurobindo himself is seen to be another offspring. It is within this context of transnational Indian spirituality that I understand the equivalence of Swami Chidananda and Jesus in Jerry’s narrative as a smooth hermeneutic manoeuvre, accommodating cross-cultural and cross-religious differences within a universalist discourse of faith.

Movement within the Integral Yoga Network

Eva is a German *ashramite*, born in a relatively well-to-do family in Germany in the 1950s. It bothered her from a young age that a vast population of the world lived in poverty and in conditions that were unthinkable for her. It made her question life and the existence of god. Born and raised Catholic, she felt extremely disillusioned with the church when it could give no satisfactory answers to her questions. At the age of 18, she formally withdrew from the church and soon migrated to Canada for university education. But there too she felt depressed, finding no meaning in the socially prescribed life goals of getting a job, getting married, having children and so on.

¹⁵² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIWqJ8tJ8JU>

She said, one day she was walking down a tree lined alley and the trees seemed completely unreal to her, making her feel unsettled. Suddenly a prayer arose in her, although she had not prayed for years, “Oh Lord, if you exist, show me the way”. As if in response, just a few metres ahead, on a tree she saw a placard saying “meditation”. It was the board advertising a lecture by a follower of Sri Chinmoy¹⁵³ (1931-2007). Sri Chinmoy had spent 20 years in Sri Aurobindo *ashram*. He went to New York in 1964 and travelled to many different countries including Canada where Eva met his follower at the lecture. Eva was very impressed by the lecture and subsequently joined the “Chinmoys”. However, her Canadian visa expired soon thereafter and she had to return to Germany. By this time, Eva said, due to her time spent with the Chinmoys, there had been an “opening” and she was interested in pursuing a spiritual life. While in Germany, she met a guru who had come from Pondicherry. He came to her hometown and gave a lecture from Sri Aurobindo and the Mother’s teachings. At the end of the lecture, Eva walked up to him and told him about her life briefly. He listened to her and said, “What you have are not physical problems, these are spiritual problems. Go to India, all answers are there”. Following his advice, Eva travelled to Sri Aurobindo *ashram* where she continues to live.

I find Eva’s arrival narrative interesting for several reasons. Her unexpected prayer and the appearance of the meditation board strikes me as highly instructive of her spiritual quest and the nature of transnational Indian spirituality. Although she had given up on the church, clearly there remained an interiorised, personal orientation toward Jesus albeit one that resurfaces unexpectedly. As mentioned in Chapter 4, modern devotion toward Jesus is not contradictory to anti-church attitudes. As Jesus becomes personally knowable or at least approachable, he also becomes personally malleable such that a prayer to Jesus can be answered through a pointer toward other faiths, all of which can be incorporated into a personal register of spirituality. At the same time, modern Hindu spiritual-philosophical schools of thought easily accommodate expressions of a, “globally inclusive economy of faith” (Srinivas 2010, 95) so that a call to “the lord” being answered in the form of meditation is nothing surprising after all.

It is important to note here that Sri Aurobindo *ashram* in Pondicherry does not have any branches in other parts of the world. Interestingly, while many gurus from India travelled abroad to spread their word, Sri Aurobindo’s homecoming was routed through the West. After returning to India, he never went back to England nor travelled anywhere else to spread his teachings. However, as already apparent, practitioners of Integral Yoga have set up centres in many different countries, most

¹⁵³ See Goldberg (2010) for a brief biographical sketch of Sri Chinmoy.

notably in the United States, extending the reach of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother¹⁵⁴. One of my American interlocutors, Frank, now living in Pondicherry, had spent several years at a Sri Aurobindo centre in Lodi, Northern California, before he came to India. During my fieldwork in Pondicherry, he introduced me to another American woman, Gayatri, who is associated with the Lodi centre and who was visiting Pondicherry for a few weeks.

Gayatri had been introduced to the writings of Sri Aurobindo and Mother by her boyfriend when she was only 17. Growing up in a “small place” in New England (she did not mention which town, only that it was small – “not rural but not a city”), she said she had been dissatisfied with the church and Sunday school and could not find answers there as to the true purpose of life. However, her then-boyfriend had been part of a study group in Boston where they discussed Sri Aurobindo’s teachings. Gayatri’s boyfriend gave her a booklet written by Sri Aurobindo (she could not remember the title) which struck a chord with her, “I was so ripe for it”, she said. Thereafter, she went and joined an Integral Yoga centre in Matagiri and a few years later, in 1977, joined another community of Sri Aurobindo followers who subsequently established the centre in Lodi.

The centre maintains connections with the *ashram* in Pondicherry in various ways. Donating money to the *ashram* in Pondicherry, and sending their members for short visits are some ways of maintaining connections. There are also other significant kinds of movements consolidating ties between them, the movement of “relics” for one. Relics refer to the hair and nail clippings of Sri Aurobindo which his devotee and personal attendant, Champaklal, had lovingly collected over time. A compilation titled, *The Significance of Relics*, published by the Lodi centre states, “Things used by developed persons imbibe the consciousness of the person concerned. The qualities of the person permeates the object” (4)¹⁵⁵. Sri Aurobindo’s relics are supposed to be special objects that carry and permeate the presence of Sri Aurobindo, “Where these Relics are, there Sri Aurobindo’s physical presence is” (5). Gayatri told me that the Lodi *ashram* celebrates 19th April as Relics Day, the day they brought Sri Aurobindo’s relics from Pondicherry. The relics were enshrined at the Lodi centre in a ceremony attended by more than two hundred people (Gleig 2012, 48). Bringing the relics to the *ashram* was highly significant for the *ashram* as these make Sri Aurobindo’s presence felt very strongly, Gayatri said.

Etymologically, the word “relic” is derived from the Latin “relinquere” which means to “leave behind” (Schopen 1998, 256). The Sanskrit equivalent of relic is taken to be the word “*dhatu*”

¹⁵⁴ A list of ‘Integral Yoga Centres in USA’ can be found here: <http://www.miraura.org/grp/usa/usa-cnt.html>

¹⁵⁵ http://sasp.collaboration.org/pdf/relics_booklet.pdf

which means “element” or “core” (ibid). Although there are etymological differences between the Latin derived relic and the Indic understanding of it, Schopen (ibid) argues that in practice, both Christianity and Indic traditions understand relics – the material remains of a dead saint or martyr - as animate, carrying in it the life and spirit of the dead. Catholic saints’ bodies, for instance, show the sacred nature of saints through miracles both when they are alive and after death. Relics made from their body parts are seen as exhibiting “overwhelming divinity” and as capable of transferring the extraordinary quality of their being to the supplicant (Fowler 2011, 141). This echoes Marcel Mauss’s views on objects that they are animated by *mana* (“the magical, religious and spiritual force” of the object), invested as they are with traces of their owners, creators, and handlers (Mauss 2002, 13). On a similar note, looking at objects that Sathya Sai Baba was supposed to have conjured miraculously from thin air, such as sacred ash, sweets, rings and necklaces, Tulasi Srinivas (2010) argues that these objects are invested with Sai Baba’s presence in an extended field of sacredness (289). Here, deity, devotee and objects are, “all plastic substances that change at will, as God can invest all three simultaneously and silently” (ibid). Relics, going by the logic of plasticity, are embodied extensions of Sri Aurobindo.

Amongst Hindus, the common funeral practice is to cremate the dead and then immerse their ashes in a river. But bodies of people deemed extraordinary like *sadhus* and gurus are embalmed and buried in a tomb called *samadhi*. *Samadhi* actually refers not to a physical site such as the tomb but to a state of intense “meditative absorption or enstasis” (Fort 2006, 271). However, in common parlance, tombs of gurus are called *samadhi*, referring to the gurus’ death as a state of communion with the divine and, thus, as something more than ordinary death. The site of the *samadhi* which houses the entombed bodies of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is regarded by followers as a powerful place imbued with the spirit of the gurus which makes their presence felt at all times in the *ashram*. The *samadhi* is always covered in a profusion of flowers, and a majestic tree stands over the *samadhi* making it the sanctum sanctorum of the main building. There is hushed silence as devotees and visitors file to pay obeisance at the *samadhi*, variously kneeling down to touch their foreheads to the cool marble surface, or sitting down for a few seconds resting both palms facing downwards on it, or simply standing and running their fingers on the *samadhi* and the tree as they peregrinate clockwise around it. The bodies, and by extension the *samadhi*, are seen by devotees as animate, lively matter.

In case of the Lodi Centre, the relics can be thought of as performing the same function as the *samadhi* in Pondicherry, where the sacred substances ensure the omnipresence of the guru. One could argue that they invigorate the Lodi *ashram* with Sri Aurobindo’s presence, establishing his

spirit as the *deus loci*. Further, the relics can be thought of as a source of “portable sanctity” (Rothkrug 2006), where the movement of the relics from one location to another does not take away the efficacy of the relics. To the contrary it infuses different locations with its mana. Thus, the *ashram* in Pondicherry and the centre in Lodi, across continents, maintain a connection through the movement of the guru’s effulgence embodied in the relics, and through people like Eva and Gayatri who move across various nodes in the Integral Yoga network which itself is a part of the wider ecumene of Indian spirituality.

Interestingly, unlike Eva who was exhorted by the Indian guru to travel to India, emphasising the spiritual origin myth of “all answers are there”, Frank told me that he had been content to stay in the Lodi centre and did not really, “feel drawn here (India) at all”. If the centre had not sent him to Pondicherry, he would not have made any special effort to travel to India. This in fact speaks of the success of global spirituality where teachings and philosophies from different traditions are transplanted, transmuted and transformed. And yet, although Frank had no desire to physically travel to India and for him turning toward Sri Aurobindo is not necessarily a turning toward India, still he feels that Sri Aurobindo’s teachings grew out of the long history of spirituality that India has developed. “Sri Aurobindo”, he says, “is a flower of that, he really brings it all together”. Place enchantment of India, thus, involves a process of locating spiritual traditions *in* India by means of their global displacement.

Conclusion

Doreen Massey (2005) argues that instead of thinking of the global as the transient and fluid nowhere as opposed to the local as the fixed here, we need to rethink the local and the global in terms of their interconnections whereby both the local and the global are understood as constantly in the process of being made. I have located a global Indian spirituality within networks of movement cutting across and through India and the West. Interactions and interconnections between the local and the global are realised through criss-crossing journeys of people, ideas and objects. On the one hand, these create the possibilities and conditions – social, economic and political – for people to physically travel to India in search of gurus specifically or spirituality in general. On the other hand, they reinforce geopiety for an imagined India without necessitating physical travel to India. The boundaries of spiritual India then collapse and expand in continuous unfoldings.

Hannerz (2002), notes that anthropologists, “by way of the interest in globalization, have also after a fashion returned to diffusion” (3). Certainly, I have looked at the dissemination and consequent diffusion of ideas and spiritual teachings. But I have also looked at the solidification of Indian

spirituality or India as a spiritual place precisely through diffusion. This dialectic, I argue, lies at the heart of the place enchantment of India. For, a globalised world is not necessarily a deterritorialised world, it is a world that requires a different understanding of the making of locations.

Just as the arrival narratives and journeys of my interlocutors formed the bulk of the content of my previous chapter, a different arrival story underscores this chapter – the arrival of flesh-and-blood gurus in the United States and parts of Western Europe. Their role and significance cannot be overemphasised in the unfolding tale of India's spiritual allure and the response to modernity through an alternative modernity. In the next two chapters, I will explore the content and ramifications of the alternative proposed and envisaged by my interlocutors. The aspirations of gurus to reach out to a wider global audience and that of seekers to find authenticity in alternative spaces in parts of the globe that are seen to dance to a different temporal rhythm represent two sides of the same coin: the enchantments of modernity.

SETTLED LIVES

Chapter 4. Re-enchanting the Self: The Discourse and Praxis of Authentic Selfhood

Introduction

In Chapter 2, I wrote of my interlocutors' arrival narratives, that is, narratives of how, why and when they first arrived at Indian spirituality and the physical location of India. Often, talking to my interlocutors, what stood out was the refrain of anguish, the angst of disenchanted selves pushing them toward exploring other ways of life through which they sought to find their "true" self. Intertwined with their desire to go somewhere else was the desire to know their authentic selves. While in the previous two chapters, I looked at the ways in which India is enchanted as a sacred space, in this chapter I focus on the ways in which some of my interlocutors re-enchant their selves through their affiliation with Indian spirituality. Their arrival narratives, I contend, are not simply narratives of arriving at a new geographical destination. These are simultaneously narratives of arriving at the destination of the self through a journey inward. Alex Owen, in her book on Occultism, makes a case for, "the will to know oneself as the paradigmatic goal of modernity" (Goodwin 2012, 327). She argues that the self is at the core of meaning-making in modern society emphasising, "the self-conscious exploration of personal interiority and the modern drive towards self-realization" (Owen 2004, 13). A similar reading is borne out of my interlocutors' arrival narratives where the response to social meaninglessness is echoed in the experience of the personal as meaningless, and, "social and individual transformation are the watchwords" (Owen 2004, 14) of their spiritual discourse. The sections of this chapter will examine my expatriate interlocutors' discourse and practice(s) of personal transformation.

Yet, my attempts at trying to unearth the exact import of their quest to know the self and meaning-making is based on their retrospective narratives of looking back at who they were then (before their journey to India and to their guru) versus who they are now (post-encounter with their guru and Indian spirituality). In this chapter, I shall begin with a discussion of my interlocutors' construction of the self through retrospective narration, looking back at one's life and state of being as inauthentic. From the vantage point of the present, they create a new authentic self which is compatible with their present life in India and their future aspirations.

I will return to the topic of authenticity later in this chapter. But to set the scene for my pending discussion, let us consider that, “living an authentic life means that there are realities that I value, which I have come to discern within a significant community, and which make sense in relation to an ultimate good, the love of which enables me to do and to be good. In that sense the movement into an authentic life has the character of a ‘quest’ and is often articulated in narrative” (McEvoy 2009, 167). It is important to note at this point that my interlocutors’ quest journey toward living, “a full and satisfying existence” (Giddens 1991, 9) started with the rejection of Christian “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1988), in favour of alternative means of “finding” themselves, mainly through neo-Hindu thought¹⁵⁶. In the second section of this chapter, I review their rejection of, what they perceived to be, the inauthentic status of Christianity and the church. Many of my interlocutors considered (and still consider) theological doctrines and the institution of the church to be inimical to a “direct” experience of the divine. Neither satisfied with what they saw as the mediated religiosity of Christianity nor with a non-divinised secularism, they turned to Indian spirituality for a direct experience of the divine through which they reconstruct their selves as “connected” to something bigger than themselves. They often spoke of feeling connected to Pondicherry and the Mother, referring to a feeling of intimacy, belonging, certainty and security¹⁵⁷.

As discussed in the previous chapter, many of my interlocutors travelled to India in search of a guru who, they believed or hoped, would be able to give them the experience that they were after, the experience of the authentic, connected self. They also desired to find an answer to their questions about the true nature of the self and the ethical purpose of their life on this planet. As also explored earlier, given the extensive reach of the global network of Indian spirituality, there were many guru options available to choose from. As Sally remarked once, “when we came (to India at the end of the 1960s) we could have gone to Neem Karoli Baba, Anandamayi Ma, Meher Baba, Muktananda, you know, it was crazy”. Given the choices, how would one know that they had, after all, found the “right” guru? In the section on *darshan*, I elaborate on the affective encounter of some of my interlocutors with the Mother, and argue that personal experience emerges as the most significant test of having arrived at the right guru. Personal experience also validates the guru’s authenticity as much as it authenticates the seeker’s self. Many of my interlocutors felt, through the *darshan*

¹⁵⁶ Many had also experimented with neo-Buddhism and continued to hold it in high regard. However, given the scope of my thesis, I will focus on neo-Hinduism here.

¹⁵⁷ This in turn, many felt, was because they must have had some association with India in their past lives. They also felt that, perhaps unbeknownst to them in their youth, they were meant to pursue spiritual practice at a later stage in life and it was only inevitable that they would land up here. Fate and *karma*, as I explore below, were important cosmological concepts in their personal narratives and understanding of their selves.

experience, that the Mother knew them better than they knew themselves. For them, encountering her was encountering one's true self.

In the last two sections, I shall discuss the strands of neo-Hindu teachings which many of my interlocutors have adapted, and the ways in which they import these concepts and ideas into their personal lexicon and praxis of a new selfhood. Through the practice of “surrendering” to the guru and through the discourse of *karma*, “connection” and “calling”¹⁵⁸, they reinterpret their guru choice as something out of their control. In vanquishing their personal agency, I argue, they reformulate agency in terms of relationality with the guru and the divine. Gurus themselves become a tool and technique of some of my interlocutors' spiritual agency. It is these adaptations that are crucial to the re-construction of their self as connected. Thus, while in the preceding two chapters I discussed the cultural consumption of Indian spirituality and guru choice as being animated by the same forces of late modern capitalism and neo-liberalism which many sought to leave behind, here I will juxtapose cultural consumption with the possibilities of a renewed, re-enchanted identity created in terms of the “connected self”.

Narrating the self

Arrival narratives were important registers of meaning-making both for my interlocutors as well as myself, the anthropologist. The shared characteristics of individual narratives – tales of travelling to India in search of an alternative lifestyle, disenchantment with their own society, anxieties of the self, and meeting the guru – form some of the important themes of my thesis chapters. But just as these functioned as important heuristic devices for me in allowing me to spot similarities in their life stories, so too for my interlocutors the arrival narratives served a very important function: that of recreating the self. Their arrival narratives are important to the creation and performance of their selves, for through the articulation of particular experiences, they both recall these experiences and recreate them, in the process reshaping their identity by coming to understand themselves as being a certain kind of person (Ochs and Capps 1996). I suggest in this chapter that through the discourse and registers of meaning offered by doctrines of *karma* and rebirth, and terms like connection and calling, many of my interlocutors recreate themselves as authentic selves in the sense of being true to their spiritual beliefs. I will explore this theme in detail in the following sections, but for now I want to discuss the importance of narratives in the process of self-reconstruction.

¹⁵⁸ Henceforth, these terms are used without quotation marks.

Narratives are integral to peoples' self-construction, whereby the self is understood as a "reflexive project" (Giddens 1991), constantly being evaluated, improved and reshaped through the recalling and retelling of life experiences (Buitelaar and Zock 2013; Dunn 2014). Narratives organise and structure memory, "to segment and purpose-build the very 'events' of a life" (Bruner 2004, 694), around which one's personal identity and sense of the self are built. However, as Paul Ricoeur (1991) writes, an event in the narrative structure is more than simply an occurrence, rather it is a linguistic and mnemonic organisational device which contributes, "to the progress of the narrative as well as to its beginning and end" (21). Often in my interlocutors' narratives, a few experiences stood out and acted as pivotal events around which they would weave the rest of their narratives. Certainly, performance of the self hinges as much upon the narrator as the audience. The fact that I specifically asked them when they first travelled to India or Pondicherry, necessarily elicited responses in which these life events figured prominently. However, arrival narratives are common conversation starters among travellers and strangers in Pondicherry, allowing the tellers and listeners to share tales of common experiences, motivations and expectations. Life events are crucial in such narratives insofar as they highlight the turning point in people's lives, mapping their onward journey toward India and into themselves. So significant were some events in my interlocutors' understanding of their lives that they would often include these in their arrival narratives whether told to me or others.

Jerry, the American *ashramite* told me about his first meeting with the Mother, on two separate occasions – during my first and second fieldtrips separated by almost a year. Each time he recounted in almost the same way – with words to the same effect – how his *darshan* of the Mother shook him. Other times, I heard Amrita recount her spiritual journey to other people in the guest house where we were both staying in much the same way as she had told me more than once. She would often say, "I was a Jewish American princess. I had a house, a Mercedes, mink coats, the works". But life still seemed dissatisfactory to her. Eventually, none of what she possessed seemed important anymore. Amrita said, "I reduced myself to two suitcases", and embarked on a spiritual journey which involved coming to India.

These recurring leitmotifs point to what is extremely significant to their active reconstruction and understanding of their selves, realigned with their present spiritual aspirations and a life they view as more fulfilling than their lives before meeting their guru and/or coming to India. In highlighting and repeating certain experiences as events around which their past selves are positioned, they make possible personal myths pertaining to their present and future selves which gain legitimacy in their

own eyes and those of likeminded people. Indeed, as the sections below on surrendering, and *karma* and rebirth argue, shared vocabularies, which purportedly explain how one landed at the doorstep of a guru, end up becoming self-validating given the number of people who articulate similar views.

By “myths” here, I do not mean falsifications or lies. Rather, personal myths are those tales of our selves which represent to us and others those aspects of our lives which are most significant to us (McAdams 1993). But it does involve imagination, ordering our self in particular ways in tandem with the rhythm of life as we experience and *wish* to experience it, “A personal myth is an act of imagination that is a patterned integration of our remembered past, perceived present and anticipated future” (ibid, 12).

The intertwining of narrative and temporality has been discussed by Ricoeur (1991), who argues that lived experiences of time are most successfully expressed through narrative. Further, narratives have their own temporal structure, “drawing a configuration out of succession” of events or incidents (ibid, 22). My interlocutors configured their life narratives by way of recounting their earliest days in India from the vantage point of the present such that the past, present, and future interpenetrated in a process of constant reflection (Cunliffe, Luhman and Boje 2004). My interlocutors make sense of their past journeys in hindsight and offer these within a framework of present contextual perspectives, thus, reshaping not only their journeys but also themselves in terms of a temporal shift: the past self on the journey to India remoulded into the present self living in India. Amrita, for instance, distanced herself from her past materialistic self in order to arrive at her present self which is spiritual and, hence, insofar as Amrita and most of my interlocutors understand spirituality as being in contrast with materialism, more in tune with her life in India. The location of India¹⁵⁹ is, therefore, important for the affirmation and performance of their spiritual identity. Narratives of individual selves, then, also participate in wider collective vocabularies of what it means to be spiritual and live a spiritual life, themes that I explore in this and the next chapter¹⁶⁰. The communal discussion and use of self-narratives with similar points of focus – departure from the country of birth, experiencing the self as disenchanted – help to affirm one’s narrative as an authentic expression, ratified by similar narratives of others. However, before discussing these, I want to look at some of my interlocutors’ rejection of the church which provided the primary impetus for their turning toward Indian spirituality.

¹⁵⁹ As noted in Chapter 2, themes of difference and distance underpin the choice of India as a spiritual destination.

¹⁶⁰ In the next chapter, I shall also explore the tensions immanent in superimposing a tale of personal re-enchantment on the hyperreal India.

Departing from Christianity

Jonas says he grew up in a Roman Catholic family and he was a “servant” in the church. I am not sure what he means by “servant”, so I ask him for clarification. He explains that he served the priest at mass [that is, he was an altar boy] and by all accounts was a regular church goer. But then, when he was in his late teens, one day in the church, he felt something [pointing to his chest]. It was a deep pain and some sort of “movement” which he could not explain. He went up to the priest and asked why this was happening, but the priest could not explain it to his satisfaction. Jonas says at that point, he felt completely disillusioned, he was heartbroken and realised that the church had nothing to offer him. With tears streaming down his face, he turned around and walked out of the door. Jonas says the church was dark inside because of the painted windows. “Stepping out”, he smiles at his recollection, “I stepped into the light” (edited field notes)

I find Jonas’s reversal of the Christian light/dark metaphor highly interesting. Whereas colonialists and missionaries projected the “natives” as heathens because of their religious views, as living in darkness and in dire need of being brought to light through Christianity, in a role-reversal, the church for Jonas is the place of darkness because it is incapable of addressing the intimate, experiential anxieties of people. If the church and the priest cannot know one’s innermost truth, Jonas seemed to be asking, then what is it good for? In effect, the Roman Catholic Church, for Jonas, failed to meet the demands of New Age spiritual sensibilities. Kenneth recalled to me how disillusioned he had felt with the church when the priest was unable to satisfactorily answer his questions about the deeper meaning of the self and life as such. This sense of dissatisfaction with the church and Christianity in general informed many of my interlocutors’ narratives.

Charles Taylor, in many of his significant works, expounds on perceptions of loss and meaninglessness in society (1989; 1991; 2007). He writes:

Everyone senses that something has changed. Often this is experienced as loss, break-up. A majority of Americans believe that communities are eroding, families, neighbourhoods, even the polity; they sense that people are less willing to participate, to do their bit; and they are less trusting of others. Scholars don’t necessarily agree with this assessment, but the perception itself is an important fact about today’s society (2007, 473).

Indeed, as I found during fieldwork, such perceptions underscored my interlocutors’ narratives and spurred them on their quest for the elsewhere and the Other. In *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1991), Taylor argues that one of the things that people bemoan and lament about is individualism. The emphasis on the individual and its enshrining in modern nation states (for example, through the Constitution in republics which holds certain individual rights and choices as inviolable) has given people, “the right to choose for themselves their own pattern of life, to decide in conscience what convictions to espouse, to determine the shape of their lives in a whole host of ways that their

ancestors couldn't control [...] In principle, people are no longer sacrificed to the demands of supposedly sacred orders that transcend them" (Taylor 1991, 2). And yet, this distancing from the greater, cosmological ordering of the world, Taylor writes echoing Max Weber, has been often expressed through existential angst, in the feeling that the individual has lost something valuable (ibid)¹⁶¹. Certainly, my interlocutors argued that the West has lost recourse to the divine, the extraordinary, or "the great chain of Being" (ibid, 3).

Taylor argues that authenticity¹⁶², by which he means self-fulfilment and the desire to be true to oneself by identifying what one holds to be of ultimate value and striving toward that, is both derived from individualism and reacts against it. On the one hand, he writes, "the ethic of authenticity [...] builds on earlier forms of individualism [...] where the demand is that each person think self-responsibly for him- or herself [...] which sought to make the person and his or her will prior to social obligation" (Taylor 1991, 25). On the other hand, "authenticity also has been in some respects in conflict with these earlier forms. It is a child of the Romantic period, which was critical of disengaged rationality and of an atomism that didn't recognize the ties of community" (ibid). My interlocutors' quest for authenticity centred on a commitment to the individual self and self-fulfilment, but the means to such self-realisation were sought in something bigger than the individual, the "more-than-anthropocentric" as Taylor suggests (Anderson 1995, 107). And yet, the church itself was viewed by Jonas and others as inauthentic insofar as it could not provide satisfactory answers to the question, "who am I?" In his study of Western spiritual tourists to Rishikesh, Norman (2011) finds that, "most spiritual tourists see Christianity as an institutional, almost 'corporate' religion that, like other large corporations is seen to care little for 'real people'. In contrast, traditions and practices such as those offered in Rishikesh are seen to be concerned with practices and philosophies of life that seek to address the problems of individuality without having to give in to belief and dogma" (41). Thus, the church is seen to be modern, too much of the present, whereas the search is for "ancient" traditions. In the case of my interlocutors, ancient

¹⁶¹ Taylor has been critiqued for his assumption that the modern world is inherently disenchanted (Meyer 2012). Instead, as I argued in Chapter 2, modernity creates its own enchantments, thus, re-enchanting the modern world. The creation of spiritual India is one such source of enchantment.

¹⁶² Giddens (1991) also defines authenticity as, "being true to oneself". Personal growth depends on conquering emotional blocks and tensions that prevent us from understanding ourselves as we really are. To be able to act authentically is more than just acting in terms of self-knowledge that is as valid and full as possible; it means also disentangling – in Laing's terms – the true from the false self" (79). The Christian church-self is here rejected as false while an alternative selfhood is sought through affiliation with a guru or *ashram*.

Indian traditions representing India's spiritual alterity, the history of which discourse has been elaborated on in the previous chapters.

For Sally, *sanatana dharma* is the key to understanding her own chosen affiliation with India. Loosely translated, *sanatana dharma* means eternal religion or eternal law. The term has been used in many Indic scriptures like the law compendium, *Manusmriti*, epics like the Mahabharata, and the collection of Buddhist verses in the *dharmapada* (Dimitrova 2007, 90). In late 19th and early 20th centuries, *sanatana dharma* was used as, "a symbol of orthodoxy [...] of various practices and structures that that were perceived in particular regional and historical contexts as encapsulating 'traditional' Hinduism" (Zavos 2001, 121). Dimitrova distinguishes the two, arguing that *sanatana dharma* in the narrow sense refers to orthodox *sanatanists*, whereas in the broad sense it refers to "eternal true religion". In the latter sense of the term, Hinduism was claimed to be characterised by *sanatana dharma* by *sanatanists* as well as by, "the Theosophical Society, Arya Samajists, Gandhi, and adherents of many other reform traditions and movements of modern Hinduism, in other words, by most Hindus as a designation for their systems of belief" (Dimitrova 2007, 90). Used in the broad sense, *sanatana dharma* is both specific to Hinduism and universalist in its appeal.

Sally was not unaware of the modern trajectory of the term *sanatana dharma* and the ways in which certain sections of the right-wing Hindu population are trying to monopolise claims to the Hindu *dharma*. She said:

I mean people always say the *sanatana dharma* is the foundation of Hinduism. I don't really know if it is or not but it's that other places got left over, were not allowed to have whatever was their religion before [...] I mean all the sacred places were demolished. We don't even know what that was. But somehow India has managed to go through all those changes without losing that widening. I mean now they are trying to monotheise, the political people are trying to simplify the religion so they can use it. But they won't succeed. I mean I think the key, the salient point about it is that you have this aim and then you work out how to work toward it. It's not like you will not do the following things, it's you will find out a proper way. If you read *Mahabharata* for instance, the whole thing can be seen not about war at all, it could be seen about theoretical discussion, about on what basis do we decide how to act. Well you know monotheistic religions don't really go for that, they go for how can we enforce what we have already decided, is the way to act [...] it's just that it's alive here and it was probably alive like this in different places [...] So, *sanatana dharma* is just shorthand really for what we mean, as written in simple definition anyway it is universal good behaviour. And then [in monotheistic religions] you have prohibitions which means you can't exercise your own or your group's judgement, you have to take what's given in the monotheistic religions.

To many of my interlocutors such as Sally, Christianity appears to have a strict tenor. They argued that monotheistic religions primarily list a whole range of injunctions by way of which one is meant

to lead their lives. This, to them, was alienating and intrusive. Amrita, for example, thought that Christianity provides no insight whatsoever into the true nature of the self. As she told me on more than one occasion, she found it profoundly unsettling that in one part of the Bible it says “man is created in the image of God”, and elsewhere it says that it is impossible to know God. “That means”, Amrita said, “I cannot know myself [...] uh huh (in a negative sing-song voice), that can’t be right”. According to many of my interlocutors, the church is too narrow to be able to direct one to the inner truth, for it is only concerned with externalities and has lost touch with the spiritual core. It is in this sense that Sally talked of Christianity establishing itself through the destruction of the sacred, referring especially to pagan traditions (as told to me in previous conversations). The destruction of ancient spiritualities has led to the erosion of the “direct spiritual link” in Europe, as Sally perceived it.

In contrast, many of my interlocutors find Hinduism to be more prescriptive than proscriptive. Since Hinduism accommodates a bewildering range of philosophy, scriptures (with different and even contradictory moral, philosophical and metaphysical import), deities, and practices, it is seen as wider and more open than Christianity or monotheistic religions as such. These ideas also echo academic understandings of Hinduism as characterised by orthopraxy, that is, “right activity” instead of orthodoxy, that is, “right opinion” (Staal 1975, 72). The central tenet of *dharma*, “the cognitive and ideological nexus of the orientations of action” (Ray 2010, 239) (the conceptual epicentre of the Hindu epic, *Mahabharata*, that Sally alluded to), underlies Hindu worldview. Staal (ibid) argues that in Hinduism, one comes across, “much intolerance in the realm of action: caste rigidity, preoccupation with ritual, obsession with pollution” but “much tolerance in the realm of doctrine: theism, monism, mysticism, animism, communism, and any kind of syncretism”. However, scholars have disputed Staal’s theorisation to argue that this distinction does not necessarily hold. Klaus Klostermaier (2007) writes that the idea of orthodoxy is not absent from Hinduism:

Doctrinal issues have been discussed by Hindus throughout the ages with tenacity and also with the understanding that there is always an aspect of absolute truth reflected in any particular religious doctrine. While there has never been one central authority in Hinduism strong enough to decide the issue categorically, the numerous heads of the various Hindu churches have nevertheless established very rigorous canons from within which their understanding of orthodoxy is defined (ibid, 43).

Definitive claims about strict injunctions in Christianity not only overlook the multiple ways in which monotheistic texts can be interpreted leaving room for manoeuvre, but they also overlook the fact that attempts to establish doctrinal hegemony have been a part of Hinduism as well. Besides, in

everyday life, Hindus are governed by religious injunctions, especially as these pertain to caste and gender hierarchies whereby each caste is supposed to perform the occupational role as suited to its *dharma*, and husbands and wives also have to act as compatible with the *dharma* of marital life (Glushkova 2005; Halbfass 1988; Jacobs 2010). Orthopraxy, thus, is both based on and creates orthodoxy. For those who have *chosen* to travel to India in order to embrace neo-Hindu teachings, a position of political and economic privilege relative to those born into Hinduism in India facilitates easy experimentation with teachings and gurus. The openness of Hinduism is partly because of its internal heterogeneity but partly because those in a position of privilege have the freedom to experience it as such¹⁶³. In the next chapter, I will once again examine definitive claims about the inherent absence of “really” spiritual teachings in the West, and the paradoxical implication of such discourses in the establishment of spiritual elitism versus religious beliefs and practices of the locals.

Dissatisfaction with both Christianity and secularism resonated in most narratives. Luigi, an Italian man in his late 50s, who has been visiting India frequently since the 1960s, said when he came to India, “we had a sense of void because there was a culture which was already a secular culture completely. Everything was secular, the other side was the church but we rejected it [...] we were searching for an answer, for inner truth”. Taylor (2007) calls the 1960s’ decade (extending into the early 1970s), the harbinger of “The Age of Authenticity”. He writes that the American youth of the 1960s were inspired by the, “Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority” (2007, 475).

The expressivist outlook of many at the time, focusing on an individual’s own spiritual path, did not necessarily find compatibility with the church. Many believed that the church was not relevant to individual lives outside of its established patterns of religious belief and doctrine, and thus, of no consequence to one’s quest for the true self. At the same time, as Taylor notes (*ibid*, 504), narrow secularism which proposes nothing more or bigger than the individual also finds no favour with many who reject(ed) the church, given the inadequacy of secularism to explain the deeper meaning of existence. Many of my interlocutors engaged in a double rejection, rejecting both secularism and the church, in order to engage with alternative technologies of the self which, “permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their bodies

¹⁶³ See also the section on guru choice and consumption in Chapter 3.

and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault 1988, 18). Providing an historical account of such technologies from classical antiquity to early Christianity, Foucault observes that the modern self in a post-Christian context engages with certain techniques, not to renounce the sinful self but to contribute positively to the creation of new subjectivities (Brodwin 2015, 2).

In the context of many of my interlocutors, rejection of Christian technologies of the self in order to create new subjectivities includes a discourse of spirituality that is primarily experiential and personally malleable, evident in such terms as “inner peace”, “inner world”, “higher self”, “ultimate truth”, “heart oriented”, “soul matter”, and “the divine within”, which were used by many of my interlocutors at different points in time. This is what Heelas and Woodhead (2005) refer to as “the subjective turn” which is, “a turn away from life lived in terms of external or ‘objective’ roles, duties and obligations, and a turn towards life lived by reference to one’s own subjective experiences” (2)¹⁶⁴. Kiran felt that “Eastern teachings”, because of their “experiential depth”, most succinctly address, “the universal, underlying levels of perennial spiritual truth”. When I asked her what exactly she meant by “Eastern teachings”, she explained, “any of the Eastern teachings that lead to an experience of non-duality. Non-duality is probably the key here -- non-duality is necessarily non-discursive (though certainly words can point to it.) ‘Philosophies’¹⁶⁵ as such (bodies of discursive knowledge) don’t usually include contemplative, meditative or mystical practice, so don’t usually lead to a direct experience of non-dual reality”.

The perennial spiritual truth that Kiran mentioned constitutes an important characteristic of neo-Vedantic spirituality, which is also a particular stream in Western esotericism including the Theosophical Society that drew inspiration from Advaitic teachings. Aldous Huxley, in *The Perennial Philosophy* (1947), provides a formulation that is closely echoed by Kiran, “*Philosophia perennis* – the phrase was coined by Leibniz; but the thing – the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality; the ethic that places man’s final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent

¹⁶⁴ See Chapter 1 for an examination of the centrality of experience in post-Enlightenment critiques of religion and rationality in religion

¹⁶⁵ By “philosophies”, Kiran is specifically referring to Western philosophers like Sartre and Heidegger. I had asked her if she had read them when she was young and grappling with questions of the meaning of life. Kiran replied that she had, in fact, been profoundly affected by these writings but that was before she found Eastern teachings. She felt that, “a lot of the Western philosophers are addressing the anomie, the alienation, specific to modern Western culture, and not necessarily the universal, underlying levels of perennial spiritual truth”.

Ground of all being – the thing is immemorial and universal” (1). By emphasising an essential, transcendental unity, the discourse of universalist spirituality enables cross-cultural movements of people away from Christianity. Nevertheless, the understanding of experience as essential, universal and ahistorical serves to reify other religions as fundamentally ahistorical and monolithic. Dialogue between various religious traditions and its impact thereof on world religions¹⁶⁶ is removed from obvious view in this universalist discourse, *even as* distinctions continue to be made between, “religion and science, Western and Eastern religions, and premodern and modern Christianity” (Bender 2010, 10).

Having said that, I must mention here that different people approached spiritual experience differently. Whereas most of my interlocutors spoke of neo-Hindu thought in terms of its appropriated experiential essence without recourse to the ritual practices of everyday Hindus, Sally and Luigi were exceptions in that they regularly visited temples and did *puja* (the Hindu practise of worshipping deities at home). But others critiqued Hindu ritual practices, in a way that brings to mind Protestant criticism of Catholic rituals, as a sign of “mindless rituals” and “mechanical actions”¹⁶⁷. Just as they rejected the church, so too, many expatriate interlocutors reject temple going and *puja*. In the next chapter, I will detail the problematic aspects of such appropriation which view the locals’ ritual practices as being devoid of “consciousness”.

However, even though the church and Christianity were largely rejected by my interlocutors as institutional and dogmatic, the figure of Jesus nevertheless figured in their discourse of spirituality. Several of them claimed to have a personal and experiential connection with Jesus. Angela, a German follower of Sri Aurobindo and Mother, said:

When I was a child, I was always in close contact with Jesus. He was my friend at my side. And in a way, he still is but not in the way the church tries to tell us. But in the way I feel as it really is. And that’s a different way of feeling. That’s more the way that God is in everything, yeah? But churches don’t like it when people make their own religiousness. You have to believe what they say, and that I can’t.

Sally similarly found Christianity to be limited, “I did my mass [as a child]. I had a mentor when I was about eleven [...] I did my absolute best, got confirmed but it’s limited, it’s limited, Christianity. Except for the devotion. And that’s, you can’t argue. Somebody loves Jesus, just

¹⁶⁶ However, as discussed in Chapter 1, the history of religious dialogue is steeped in asymmetries evident in the context of religious exchanges in colonial India. Also see Masuzawa (2005) for an analysis of the Western construction of world religions.

¹⁶⁷ See Chapter 1 for Schleiermacher’s critique of religious customs.

wonderful you know! I mean I love Jesus, it's great!" A modern devotionalism guides the approach of many to Jesus, whereby he is dislocated from the institutions and doctrines of Christianity and reinstated within an interiorised, gnostic approach. Seen in this way, the experientially reconstructed Jesus becomes compatible with a private and mystical domain of the soul unfettered by liturgical practices¹⁶⁸. However, as mentioned in Chapter 1, with reference to Latour (1993), post-reformation Christianity enabled God to be known in the "heart of hearts" without necessitating mediation by the church or clergy. Therefore, the move of dislocating Jesus from Christianity, in the sense of mitigating the distance between a lay individual and Jesus, is neither secular nor wholly un-Christian. Still, the modern, overwhelmingly experiential basis of spiritual discourses allows people to carve "their own religiousness", as Angela said, in keeping with the expressive ethos of self-fulfilment. The following section on *darshan*, that is, the affective encounter with the guru elaborates on the centrality of experience in the modern "reflexive project of the self" (Giddens 1991).

Darshan: authenticating the self

During my first few weeks in Pondicherry, I was flummoxed by photos of the Mother's eyes being sold at various shops in the city. Enlarged shots of just her eyes, divorced from the rest of the body, struck me as rather odd. Why were they selling photos of only her eyes, I wondered. Shanti Pillai (2005), in her doctoral research on Auroville, also mentions similar enlarged images of the Mother's eyes which give the impression of the Mother, "as the unseen seer of all things" (320). She writes about a few college students from the United States, where Pillai served as a faculty member, who were visiting Auroville as part of a study abroad programme. During their stay in Auroville, the students included an image of the Mother's eyes in their self-organised Halloween party. Relocated from its usual position in the guesthouse, the photograph now hung above a chalkboard from where her eyes looked out spookily, adding to the Halloween festive decorations (Pillai 2005). Pillai recalls that when she narrated the story to a former resident of Auroville, the latter quipped, "They just don't get the idea of '*darshan*', do they?" (ibid, 322). Quite like the American students, it took me a while to recognise the ritual significance of these photos. Those interlocutors who had the chance of meeting the Mother in person said that the Mother's eyes could look deep and straight into your very being. Photographs of her eyes capture the psycho-somatic aspect of the Hindu practice of *darshan*, and keep alive the Mother's aura long after her passing.

¹⁶⁸ This also resonates with Schleiermacher's thought on all religions as ignited by an "inner fire" – see Chapter 1.

Much has been written on the practice of *darshan* within Hindu traditions. Derived from the Sanskrit root word “*drs*”, meaning vision or sight, *darshan*, “is the intimate process of seeing and being seen by a deity” (Lucia 2014b, 42). *Darshan* is an active visual participation of both deity and devotee in the field of mutual visual exchange, and beneficence for the devotee. Implicit in the root meaning of *darshan* is the idea of insight or true knowledge of the nature of reality. Christopher Pinney (2004) writes that the word *darshan* can be understood as, “‘seeing and being seen’ by a deity, but which also connotes a whole range of ideas relating to ‘insight’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘philosophy’” (9). Through *darshan* of the deity, the devotee gains true insight into reality and accomplishes communion with the divine. Such visual piety extends to *darshan* of the guru as well who is ideally regarded as the, “living vehicle for truth” (Forsthoefel and Humes 2005, 3). Sacred beholding of the guru has the power to catalyse radical transformation in the devotee as the guru looks upon the devotee in an all-encompassing gaze. At a more mundane level, devotees may seek the guru’s *darshan* to beseech him or her to solve problems related to everyday life. Whatever the devotee’s aim, *darshan* “implies sight on a rich multiplicity of symbolic and spiritual levels which demonstrate a complex mix of doctrinal and mythic, perceptual and visionary, interactional and experiential dimensions in the relationship” (DuPertuis 1986, 115) between guru and disciple.

Several studies of charismatic gurus talk at length about the ritual of *darshan* and its transformative impact on the devotee. In the Radhasoami tradition, the guru’s gaze is considered to be an all-seeing, all-knowing gaze which penetrates into the innermost recesses of the devotee’s soul. In turn, through the gaze, the devotee transcends his or her mundane identity to catch a glimpse of the “Supreme Being” (Babb 1981). In the Sathya Sai Movement, devotees gather every morning to catch a glimpse of Baba. “Devotees state that in the ritual of seeing and being seen by the divinity of Sathya Sai Baba, they experience a moment of ultimate self-transformation by which they are ‘captured’ spiritually and experience a ‘complete immersion in Sai Baba’s love’” (Srinivas 2010, 158). Likewise, devotees of Amma, “relate similar experiences of the dissolution of individual boundaries, immersion in divine love, and cosmic awakenings” (Lucia 2014b, 43) as Amma looks straight in their eyes. For devotees, the guru’s *darshan*, thus, leads to spiritual awakening and self-transformation dissolving ontological boundaries between the guru and devotee, and through the guru between the devotee and the divine.

In my conversations with people in the *ashram*, I often heard stories of *darshan* of the Mother, speaking of her glance as life transforming. On more than one occasion, people used the phrase “blown away” to describe the impact of their meeting with her. Jerry recalled his experience of

meeting the Mother to me on two separate occasions. Upon reaching Pondicherry from Rishikesh in November 1971, he said, he had his first *darshan* of the Mother. On certain designated days, the Mother used to give *darshan* to people privately in her chamber, while on other occasions she would give public *darshan* to many visitors who queued to meet her. She was also known to give “balcony *darshan*” when she would appear on the balcony of the main *ashram* building to behold devotees who gathered on the street below (Pillai 2005). On 24th November¹⁶⁹ 1971, one of the designated *darshan* days, Jerry had his first *darshan* of the Mother, a balcony *darshan*. Jerry says that the *darshan* “was very impressive” and that he was, “just dumbstruck by the power, the aura, the cocoon of peace in which she could just encapsulate us all, and yet when I went home and just sat down I realized that she had not touched my heart and I just wondered if she was really the one for me”. Given his slightly disappointing *darshan*, Jerry asked for an appointment to meet her again, which was arranged for three weeks later. On the appointed day, Jerry recollected:

At 11.30 we were called up onto this terrace above the Mother’s room. There were about 30 of us, and we were asked just to sit down, and then close to twelve, an attendant of the Mother came and asked us to get into a line [...] Most people went with a little bouquet of flowers to give to her, she sat in a chair and they looked into her eyes and then sat down before her and some people took fifteen seconds, thirty seconds, some people it was even less than that. When my turn came, I was already in a dazed condition, what happened as I entered the room, I became aware of a tangible force field of entangled power that was really gripping and it sort of abstracted me. It threw my mind back upon myself, my mind slowed down, everything seemed to slow down with such a dense field of energy and consciousness [...] And then I turned and knelt down before the Mother [...] and I got lost in her eyes.

As I looked, I was looking into the clear blue sky and I seemed to go further and further into it and [...] there was a great sense of expansion and lightness. And I could feel my whole body was relaxing and the residual tension we have but don’t even know about seemed to be dissolving. And I kept looking and it just kept on happening and happening and happening. And pretty soon I am light as a feather and all stretched out and I was just looking into those eyes and there was enough sense of presence in me to have a sense of wonder and amazement that such a thing should happen [...] I became aware that as I was looking at the Mother, so she was looking at me. And as soon as I became aware of this I became aware of a stream of energy coming from her going through her eyes, into mine, through my eyes down into my heart, filling my heart with the pure love within her. [Jerry takes a very deep breath, and tries to calm himself at this point for, he is overcome with emotions] And the most beautiful thing is that I did not experience as the impersonal love. I felt that [long pause as he steadies his voice] *she knew me better than I knew myself* [...] Somehow, there was no resistance in me to what she was seeing because in this [...], without thinking about it, in a course of only a few minutes, there had come about great respect for this person [emphasis added].

¹⁶⁹ For a list of *darshan* days in the *ashram*, see <http://www.sriaurobindoashram.org/ashram/saa/dates.php>

Narratives of losing all sense of time and place, and of realising that one is part of a great expansiveness, are common among devotees of many spiritual communities, be it Amma's devotees who state that they experienced the entire universe through Amma's eyes (Lucia 2014b) or Sathya Sai devotees who speak of leaving the earthly realm in the moment of gazing at and being gazed at by Baba (Srinivas 2010). In this powerful transaction of the gaze, "seeing" goes beyond commonly held notions of detached observation between guru and devotee, blurring ontological boundaries of self/other and establishing a relationship between them in which:

The achievement of heightened consciousness requires that both the giver (the divine) and the taker (the human viewer) present themselves to one another [...] In *darshan*, it is understood that the divine form and the human are both looking at one another; both entities are both subject and object. In the exchange that takes place through the eyes, the guru or image elevates the devotee who, in turn, endeavors to open herself to what is given (Pillai 2005, 318).

The powerful, affective quality of meeting the Mother was evident in Jerry's story, in which several interesting themes stand out. Jerry said that when he saw the Mother the first time he was, "dumbstruck by her aura", yet he was, in his own words, "a doubting Thomas". He was afraid that the Mother was, "an effective administrator [...] a good woman running a good show". But he was not convinced of her spiritual power. In fact, he told himself that if she was not what he was looking for, then he would return to the United States and "try there again". The spiritual marketplace, from the point of view of seekers, "is marked by rich diversity and offers a range of possible pathways of spiritual questing" (Warrier 2003, 31). As seekers move from one guru to the other looking for the right guru, personal experience becomes the most important marker of having found "the one". Not convinced by what he had heard about the Mother from others during his stay in Rishikesh¹⁷⁰, not even convinced by Sri Aurobindo's writings in which it said that "you will have to surrender to the Mother to do yoga" (Jerry's words), nor by the photographs on the wall, "of the mighty Mother, the queen" (ibid), for Jerry it took another meeting with the Mother to convince him, based on his own experience, that indeed she was, "the one for him".

As with first-time Amma devotees whose, "first encounter with Amma's *darshan* is a barometric measure of Amma's authenticity, which they discern through their immediate, personal, affective, and bodily experience" (Lucia 2014b, 71), so too in Jerry's case it was the experiential efficacy of the encounter which determined his future with the Mother and his future in India, that is, the decision to stay on or not. Warrier (2003) points out that guru seeking is not an entirely new phenomenon. Indeed, she says, there are stories in India which narrate the travails of guru seekers in

¹⁷⁰ See previous chapter for his experience in Rishikesh.

the past who travelled great distances and “sampled different gurus” until they found the “right” guru. But such stories exemplify what used to be rare and uncommon. In contrast, travelling across several gurus is common now (ibid). In such an atmosphere of spiritual consumerism, it seems, the only way to ratify authenticity is validation through experientiality, which paradoxically feeds into spiritual consumerism as seekers move from one guru to the other until the experience is had¹⁷¹.

And yet, “whilst it is true that the subjective turn sees individuals emphasizing their personal experiences as their source of meaning, significance and authority, this need not imply that they will be atomistic, discrete or selfish” (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 11). In fact, as Sally had said, her search for a guru was inspired by the desire to be in the company of someone infinitely greater than her (Chapter 2). Thus, “experience – both the desire for significant experiences and questions regarding the significance of particular experiences – continues to be a fertile and contentious space in which processes of valuation and ways of apprehending what matters come into view” (Taves and Bender 2012, 20). The *darshan* experience is a significant event in which both the guru and seeker evaluate each other in the process of creating an alternative selfhood, the seeker transforming into a disciple. The question of choice is crucial to the re-crafting of identity, both of the Mother’s (as a guru incorporated into the pantheon of Indian gurus, which I talk about below) and of followers such as Jerry. In a world of transnational connections and flows where nationality is not necessarily the defining feature of one’s identity, individuals manufacture their own identities (Appadurai 1996). In such a context, transnational spiritual or religious affiliation emerges as a significant way of constructing one’s self-identity (Appadurai 1996; Srinivas 2010). But precisely because seekers are free to choose gurus from within a huge range of available options, choosing the right guru becomes crucial to the construction and maintenance of one’s chosen identity through affiliation with the guru, “a center ‘that holds’” (Srinivas 2010, 181). While a bad guru can cause much psychological, emotional and physical harm, the belief is that the right guru places the follower on the path to self-knowledge and, hence, their inner self.

The Mother’s *darshan*, Jerry felt, revealed to him his real self, “she knew me better than I knew myself”. Another American participant, Shannon, narrated something similar about the Mother’s *darshan*. Shannon recounted that when she met the Mother for the first time, in that moment of looking into the Mother’s eyes, all her negative and positive traits were revealed to her. It was as if the Mother had held up a mirror to her and, “it was not a pretty picture”. She said the Mother

¹⁷¹ However, as Warriar (2006) argues, a significant experience like the guru’s *darshan* does not necessarily mean that devotees cease to seek other gurus. Many, she says, go to other gurus.

showed her all her shortcomings but she also showed Shannon who she really was, that she did not have to be all those things that she was not and that she could, “manifest my true self”. Such narratives of having one’s true self revealed to oneself are also common in the anthology of personal narratives of Aurovillians in the collection, *Turning Points* (2008). These narratives regard the Mother as someone who knew the person beheld even better than they knew themselves. Explaining the modern ideal of authenticity, Taylor (1994) writes that, “It accords moral importance to a kind of contact with myself, with my own inner nature, which it sees as in danger of being lost, partly through the pressures toward outward conformity, but also because in taking an instrumental stance toward myself, I may have lost the capacity to listen to this inner voice” (30). My interlocutors’ narratives of disenchantment indeed echoed resentments against outward conformity and what they perceived as instrumentality toward the self. Instead, in the Mother, they found someone who really *saw* them, understood their uniqueness in terms of all their positive and negative traits, and then revealed these to them (the seekers) while also showing them that they are both, guru and devotee, part of something bigger. *Darshan*, as “the performative act of connectivity and presencing” (Lucia 2014b, 73), therefore, authenticates the self for Jerry and Shannon by making present to them their true self and simultaneously giving them a sense of connectedness to something bigger than themselves.

Darshan with the Mother must also be thought of as a form of social interaction, authenticating her as a guru to seekers. In *Turning Points* (2008), Vijay, a long term Aurovilian who left Italy at the age of 15 and came to Pondicherry in 1967 states:

Now, one of the fixed ideas I had was that a true guru must be an Indian¹⁷². That lady, born in Paris, from a Turkish father, an Egyptian mother [...] I was only reading Sri Aurobindo, not Mother. The photo of Mother everywhere bothered me. But I thought, ‘Okay, let us see this old lady, she may be nice, she may be wise’. After all she lived a long time with Sri Aurobindo. I went without expecting anything, casually. The door opened, and [...] I have never been so astonished in my life, because I didn’t see a human being there. There was a sari, there were two eyes, a smile, but it was like a window onto the infinite. The first impression was infinity, infinite space. I couldn’t believe it. I had the impression I had lived all my life in a match box. And then, wave after wave after wave of love, like a tsunami of love (2008, 79).

While none of my interlocutors explicitly shared Vijay’s disbelief in the Mother’s spiritual prowess because she was not Indian, the Mother’s immersion in life in the *ashram* and her status as a guru in her own right is a fascinating one. As a Frenchwoman, she did not find immediate acceptance

¹⁷² The “native” as the symbol of authenticity has been rightly critiqued by Appadurai (1988) and Spivak (1999) among others. The idea that only an Indian can be a true guru exemplifies the freezing of the native into a static representational category.

among many followers of Sri Aurobindo who were recalcitrant in accepting her as their guru. But Sri Aurobindo proclaimed that she was his *shakti*, the female divine force. It was he who first referred to her as “the Mother” in his talks of 1926 (Heehs 2008, 353). He also described the Mother as an embodiment of four Hindu goddesses and their attributes of wisdom, strength, harmony and perfection, “Wisdom, Strength, Harmony, Perfection [...] to the four we give the four great names, Maheshwari, Mahakali, Mahalakshmi, Mahasaraswati” (Sri Aurobindo 2012, 18). By describing her in this way, not only did Sri Aurobindo inspire his disciples to hold her in high regard, but he also bridged the cultural distance of Western/Indian by emphasising her inner, essential divinity which could be expressed in Hindu terms precisely because of the malleability afforded by its apperceived universalism¹⁷³.

Today, the Mother has been Indianised or even Hinduised within circles of worship and devotion. In her study of Western men and women leading an ascetic life within the folds of Hindu monastic orders in Rishikesh, Meena Khandelwal (2007) finds that they are often referred to as “foreign Swamis” by the locals. The appellation demonstrates a fusion of their outsider status with acceptance as a renunciate, a swami, both by the monastic order and the locals¹⁷⁴. In my fieldwork, I found that the Mother occupied, not a liminal status like the foreign swamis, but very much an insider position. As a long-term Indian *ashramite*, whom I called Bua-ji (paternal aunty), said, “*Hamare liye woh bhagwan hai. Ma sab janti hai*” [“She is god to us. Mother knows everything”]. A young Indian man, born and brought up in France, with Tamil Hindu grandparents residing in Pondicherry, told me while he was visiting them that his grandfather wore a ring with the Mother’s symbol. He believed that to them, she was one of several deity-gurus, to be worshipped like any other Hindu god or guru.

Although a detailed study of the ways in which the Mother was incorporated into the world of the *ashram* and the smoothing over of her “foreign” origins requires a different project solely dedicated

¹⁷³ At the same time, the Hindu divine principles according to Sri Aurobindo symbolise universal divine principles and therefore can be applied to someone of another nationality.

¹⁷⁴ In the past, several Christian monks also adopted Hindu practices and combined their missionary work with Hindu renunciate life. Examples include the Italian Jesuit monk Robert de Nobili (1577-1656) who travelled to India in 1606 and adopted the orange robes commonly worn by Hindu *sannyasis* (Khandelwal 2007). In the 20th century, Henri le Saux, a French Benedictine monk took the name Swami Abhishiktananda after coming in contact with Sri Ramana Maharshi (Visvanathan 2010). Another Benedictine monk, Bede Griffiths (1906-1993) exemplified attempts at interreligious dialogue between Hinduism and Christianity. In the 1960s, Griffiths went to live in the monastery called *Shantivanam* (“the forest of peace”) founded by Henri le Saux (Beltramini 2014). In the present times, “foreign swamis” are not an unusual feature of the Indian swami landscape (Khandelwal 2007).

to this issue, my assertion about her insider positionality seems to be corroborated by Pillai (2005) in her thesis. She writes:

Increasingly, those coming to both Auroville and the *ashram* to express devotion are not the foreigners and educated North Indians who for decades comprised the majority of visitors, but lower caste, class, and rural people from throughout Tamil Nadu. It would seem that the Mother has become a new destination on the traditional pilgrimage circuit. She has taken a place in the constellation of local goddesses” (ibid, 304-5).

Outside temples in Pondicherry, the Mother’s images are sold alongside those of Hindu deities such as Ganesha and Shiva. In fact, images of her eyes are compatible with the, “iconographic importance given to eyes” in Hindu cosmology (Babb 1981, 387). “Even the crudest lithic representations of deities are likely to have eyes, if nothing else in the way of facial features” (ibid) so that the deities can give *darshan* to the devotee. Coming back to the topic of the Mother’s *darshan*, the erosion of the doubting Thomases’ scepticism regarding the Mother through their powerful experience also functions as a social platform for cultural reinvention whereby the Mother’s position in India’s guru landscape is further fortified. The Hindu practice of *darshan*, combined with the modern emphasis on experience within the transnational network of Indian spirituality, redefines cultural presumptions about who can or cannot be deemed as an authentic guru.

But there is contradiction between, on the one hand, the discerning and discriminating devotee (“is this the right guru for me?”) and, on the other, the self waiting to be authenticated in terms of being connected to one’s innermost depth through a meeting with the right guru (can the inauthentic self really discern an authentic guru?). In other words, how do people understand their gravitation toward a certain guru and their experiences, outside of the framework of deliberation? As I discuss in the ensuing sections, often my interlocutors’ understanding is framed in terms of reconceptualisation of personal agency through the practice of surrendering and the interpretive tools of *karma*, connection and calling. I will further highlight the tensions emerging from their retrospective reinterpretation of personal agency as irrelevant in relocating to India.

Divine offerings: surrendering and agency

Although vision or the ocular relation of seeing and being seen by the guru (or deity) remains central to *darshan*, other tactilities also constitute the experience and practices of *darshan*. Devotees would often try to touch Sathya Sai Baba’s gown as he walked past them during *darshan* (Srinivas 2010, 81), Amma is famous for hugging devotees and visitors during *darshan*. Touching the guru or deity, especially bowing or kneeling at their feet, is an important Hindu devotional

practice which establishes tactile intimacy between the devotee and guru (Babb 1986, 173). Touching the guru's feet is an act of humility and surrender, acknowledging the guru as a higher being. "As a means of showing respect and devotion towards a venerable personality, be it a god, a saint, or a *guru*, bowing to his or her feet has no rival in Indian culture." (Bakker 1991, 19). Many of my interlocutors recounted their initial misgivings about touching the feet of a guru. For some, it took years of conscious practice, a letting-go of ego, enabling one to surrender themselves at the feet of another. But there were also stories, comically told, of people being blown away by the very first sight of a guru. Sally and I had a good laugh over her story of a Westerner in Sri Prakashananda's *ashram*, who was initially appalled at the sight of people touching the *swami*'s feet:

We had, I remember one time which is very typical. Some guy came to the *ashram* and he watched the *darshan*, everyone's bowing you know. So he said, 'I'm not going to bow'. We all said, 'no you don't have to, you can just make *namaskar* and that's ok'. [He said] 'No, no but I do because everybody else is doing it and I don't want to', so (we said) 'you really don't have to' but even after that [he continued], 'no but I think it's really baaad that people are bowing' [we both laugh at this]. Finally, he goes and makes a lovely *pranam* feeling very happy!

The break-down of resistance on the part of the visitor, an important step in the path of devotion, is attributed to the grace and power of the guru. The guru is seen to be capable of breaking through all resistance. As in Vijay's narrative (previous section), those sceptical of the guru's power are abruptly and suddenly weaned off such sentiments without their volition. Personal agency, exercised in meeting the guru, appears as nothing more than an illusion since the guru's gaze breaks down one's ego. Whether surrendering is seen to occur spontaneously without conscious willingness, or as practice perfected over the years, renouncing the ego is an oft repeated theme in the spiritual discourse of several Indian gurus and spiritual communities.

Lucia (2014b), in explaining the notion of surrendering oneself to the guru, recalls a popular story from the Hindu epic Mahabharata where *Eklavya*, a proficient archer:

Willingly surrenders that which is most essential to his archery skills, his thumb, at the guru's command [...] Despite the evident potential for abuses of power in the guru-disciple relationship, the tradition (*guru-shishya parampara*) suggests that self-surrender at the feet of the guru leads the disciple toward the transcendence of the self, which is the aim of ascetic practice across the major religious traditions (39).

Devotees of Amma overcome their reservations about hugging strangers as they enfold themselves in Amma's embrace, taking the first step toward sacrificing their ego and transforming their selves on the spiritual path (Lucia 2014b). Warriar (2006) describes, "a new selfhood" in the case of

Amma's devotees who surrender absolutely to Amma, their guru. "Surrender is considered to be a state where, having eliminated their egotism, one becomes infinitely receptive to the Mata's love" (Warrier 2006, 186). By recognising oneself as a rather insignificant part of the larger scheme of things, devotees accept Amma as omnipotent and omniscient.

In Sri Aurobindo and Mother's Integral Yoga, selfhood is a transformative project where one learns to surrender, aspire and reject:

Surrender is the foundation of the practice: an inner receptivity to the higher forces that allow a human being to transcend the limitations of their 'animal nature'. The aspiration for the divine is something that is cultivated over time, an unshakeable desire for the higher consciousness. Rejection points to an inner discrimination between ignorance and consciousness and a discernment between choices that move on forward toward emancipation rather than those that reinforce bondage (Gleig 2012, 44)

Followers of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother often speak of surrendering to the divine, or more commonly surrendering to the Mother¹⁷⁵ – seen as an embodiment of the divine - who is believed to take care of them, her children. The Mother knows what each of her children wants and she knows what is best for them. As my interlocutors would often say, those who have faith in her need not worry about anything; all they have to do is surrender to the Mother and she will take care of the rest. Kenneth remembered a young Indian woman who used to work at the reception of Matrimandir, the temple at the centre of Auroville, where people go to meditate. Kenneth said the woman, whom he had known since she was a child, used to get very flustered and angry working at the reception. In order to calm her, Kenneth advised her to simply do her work and leave the rest to the Mother in an attitude of surrendering. "It's not yours to worry about, it's Mother's", Kenneth told the harried woman¹⁷⁶.

Within the interpretive framework of surrendering, the dividing line between mundane and miraculous events becomes fuzzy since every success, minor or major, has the quality of wonder to it. Every positive happening is understood to be the result of the Mother's or divine grace (my

¹⁷⁵ It was more common for people to talk about surrendering to the Mother than to Sri Aurobindo. One reason was that the Mother, since she had managed the practical affairs of the *ashram* and the *ashramites*, was seen as more approachable and true to her epithet, like a mother. Also, her writings, in contrast to Sri Aurobindo's, are direct and much easier to read. So, those disciples who never met the Mother in person find her more accessible than Sri Aurobindo through her writings and the stories surrounding her told or written by disciples who had been around the Mother when she was alive. However, most disciples would also often say that in saying the Mother, they were referring to Sri Aurobindo since they are, ultimately, one.

¹⁷⁶ Kenneth did not go on to say if his advice did indeed calm the woman or if she followed his advice. Whatever the efficacy of the advice, it does point to Kenneth's faith in the Mother and the notion of surrendering.

interlocutors made no difference between the two); and every failure is simply a moment to reflect on one self, evaluate what one has done wrong, and from there to move forward or aspire toward the right direction. One of my interlocutors would talk of particularly trying students at the *ashram* school, where she taught European languages, as a test set by the Mother. One time, she was finding it difficult to deal with a stropgy girl in her class. “I don’t like such characters”, she said laughing. But she reasoned that the Mother had sent this girl to her class because, “Mother does not like us disliking anyone”. Then, in the spirit of surrender, she recalled that she had left it to the Mother to choose students for her so that she would not have to worry about making any decisions.

Surrendering to the guru, as I noted before, was for them a simultaneous surrendering to the abstract principle of the divine. Shannon first came to Pondicherry in the early 1970s and lived for about 18 years in Auroville which was then in its nascent stage. When she went back to the United States, she started job hunting. She was overqualified for most jobs she applied to and kept getting rejected by potential employers. But finally, in one of her job interviews, in the interview room, she felt as if Sri Aurobindo was between her and the interviewer, looking out for her. “Sri Aurobindo’s presence was so strong”, she said. She had no doubt whatsoever that she would get the job, which she did. Once on the job, she had to do everything, “from A to Z”, and she had to learn, “it all on the fly”: lease agreements, and working with all sorts of machines including computers and photocopy machines which she did not know how to operate when she got back to the United States. That job was a real challenge, she said, but she did it in the spirit of doing yoga. The divine makes the way for you, she told me with assurance.

These narratives of surrendering, I suggest, must be understood as part of reconstruction of their self as relational and connected, offering an alternative conception of agency. Shannon’s narrative of letting things take their own course by surrendering to the divine and/or Sri Aurobindo, explicates agency as something that does not simply rest with oneself. Rather, agency is interpreted by Shannon as emergent through the relationality of guru and disciple, which in turn is symbolic of an individual’s relationship, if it can be called that, with the divine. This is envisaged by Sri Aurobindo as one of the goals of Integral Yoga. He writes, “Our more difficult problem is to liberate the true Person and attain a divine manhood which shall be the pure vessel of a divine force and the perfect instrument of a divine action” (cited in Heehs 2008, 281-2). In chapter 1, I had mentioned that *karma* yoga is one of the central tenets of Integral Yoga. In *The Synthesis of Yoga* (1999), Sri Aurobindo explains that in *karma* yoga:

The first necessity is to dissolve that central faith and vision in the mind which concentrate it on its development and satisfaction and interests in the old externalised order of things. It is imperative to exchange this surface orientation for the deeper faith and vision which see only the Divine and seek only after the Divine. The next need is to compel all our lower being to pay homage to this new faith and greater vision. All our nature must make an integral surrender [...] Our whole being—soul, mind, sense, heart, will, life, body—must consecrate all its energies so entirely and in such a way that it shall become a fit vehicle for the Divine (72).

Practitioners of Integral Yoga must surrender to the divine, giving up individual agency in order to truly become the instruments of something bigger than themselves. By giving up personal agency, these narratives, in keeping with Sri Aurobindo's vision of spiritual evolution, suggest the *recovery* of divine agency as it manifests itself through individual selves. As Johann, a German follower of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother said to me, you just have to surrender to the divine, then work itself becomes meditation. Similarly, Shannon's account of doing her work while in the United States in the spirit of doing yoga speaks of the surrendering that Sri Aurobindo outlines in his manifesto of yoga. Besides, learning to relinquish personal agency to enable participation in divine agency is not a one-off event. It is an ongoing process needing constant reminders to oneself as in my interlocutor's rationalising about the boisterous student ending up, of all the classes, in her class. Thus, Integral Yoga followers actively practice surrendering by learning to accept situations and events unquestioningly, and situating them within the larger framework of the divine plan, with an attitude of faith and devotion which guides many in their *karma* yoga.

Although the sustained practice of surrendering is specific to each individual insofar as they retrospectively re-view their choice to go to Pondicherry as answering a call, thus modifying notions of personal agency into a relational and divine agency, such discourses are in fact characteristic of modern gurus and *ashram* communities (Warrier 2006). Surrendering, I suggest, offers a ground on which choice and no-choice, mundane deliberation and divine calling, are sought to be reconciled. However, issues of personal privilege which led one to India in the first place, and historically created Orientalist imaginings, often get hidden from view in such interpretations. I will postpone discussion of these matters until the end of the next section, where I look at the discourse of *karma* and connection and calling, raising and further developing some of the issues outlined here.

Interpretive tools: *Karma*, connection and calling

In addition to their disenchantment with Western society, many of my interlocutors also explained their arrival at India and their guru in terms of *karma* and rebirth. "Past life connection" and

“*karmic* connection” were oft repeated phrases by some of my expatriate interlocutors. It is difficult to determine to what extent the popular understanding of *karma* derives from the Vedas. As various scholars have pointed out, there is no direct reference to *karma* in the Vedas (O’Flaherty 1980; Bronkhorst 2011). Whereas rebirth does not figure in the Vedas, Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty (1980) writes that concerns about liberating oneself from the cycle of life and the transfer of merit among people – two central components of *karma*– do indeed find mention in the Vedas. Thus, she argues that the idea of *karma* has its roots in the Vedas. While scholars debate if the development of the notion of *karma* can be traced to the Vedas or not¹⁷⁷, it is undisputed that later classical texts such as the *Yogasutras* of Patanjali, the *Puranas*, and epics such as the Mahabharata, deal extensively with *karma* and rebirth. Gananath Obeyeskere (1980) outlines the commonality of what he calls the “rebirth” and “*karma* eschatology” in Jain, Buddhist and Hindu texts. The common eschatological features, he writes, include:

A theory of rebirth that postulates a cyclical theory of continuity, so that death is merely a temporary state in a continuing process of births and rebirths.

A theory of *karma* that postulates that one’s present existence is determined for the most part by the ethical nature of one’s past actions.

A theory of the nature of existence known as *samsara*, which includes all living things in the cycle of endless continuity (139).

Thus, *karma* can be thought of as, “a theory of causation that supplies reasons for human fortune, good or bad” (Babb 1983, 167), whereby the fruits (*phala*) of a person’s actions in one lifetime carry forward into the next, determining who or what one is born as, how long one will live, and the kinds of experiences one will have in the next life (Potter 1980, 244). It is also in this sense that *karma* is understood and invoked in everyday life by Hindus in India (Kolenda 1964, Babb 1983), as well as by Tibetan Buddhists (Moran 2004, 11). Peter Moran (2004) writes, “As is often stated by Tibetan teachers and lay people alike, what one experiences in this life has been produced by one’s past actions (i.e. *las*); what one will experience in the future is due to one’s actions in the present” (11).

The terms, *karma* and rebirth, re-entered European and North American discourses on spirituality in the 19th century. The Theosophical Society was one of the earliest spiritual movements to make use of these tropes (Neufeldt 1986). Blavatsky explains *karma* as, “the moral law of retribution, an immutable law which adjusts effects to causes according to the principle of universal harmony [...]

¹⁷⁷ Gananath Obeyeskere (1980), for instance, writing in the same edited volume as O’Flaherty, rejects the idea that *karma* can be traced to the Vedas since there is no direct reference to the term there.

the law of *karma* is a moral law implying moral responsibility and merit and demerit” (ibid, 237). In Blavatsky’s (1974) words:

We consider *Karma* as the *Ultimate Law* of the Universe, the source, origin and fount of all other laws which exist throughout Nature. *Karma* is the unerring law which adjusts effect to cause, on the physical, mental and spiritual planes of being. As no cause remains without its due effect from greatest to least, from a cosmic disturbance down to the movement of your hand, and as like produces like, *Karma* is that unseen and unknown law *which adjusts wisely, intelligently and equitably* each effect to its cause, tracing the latter back to its producer¹⁷⁸ (emphasis in original).

Karma was integral to Blavatsky’s overall theory of universal harmony and progress. She argues that the “law” of *karma* adjusts each action to its effect or consequence, leading to an overall equilibrium in the universe. Extending the idea of perfect adjustment between cause and effect, she argues that the law of *karma* also puts, “the right person in the right place” (Blavatsky 1889, 144)¹⁷⁹. Thus, in Blavatsky’s Theosophical discourse, rebirth and reincarnation are tied to ideas of restoring justice and equilibrium in the universe, since the process of harmonisation is spread over several lifetimes. Blavatsky asserts that from one life to the next, the individual moves across a series of personalities on a scale of evolutionary spiritual development until, eventually, one returns to the primordial source of wisdom. The impersonal law of *karma* determines individual reincarnation along this scale, according to Blavatsky. This evolutionary process, she suggests, leads to the emergence of, “a new man, in effect a divine being who realizes and lives according to the unity of all of life” (Neufeldt 1986, 250). The notion of the soul’s inevitable progression through successive lifetimes is quite different to what Karl H. Potter (1986) calls the “classical *karma* theory of India”. In the scheme of things outlined in the classical *karma* theory, an individual soul can in fact regress to a “lower” life form in the next life based on the actions of this life. In effect, late 19th century American esotericism reinterpreted *karma* doctrine in fundamentally new ways, reverberations of which continue to be heard in present day spiritual discourses.

Sri Aurobindo too explains *karma* and rebirth in terms of the evolutionary process of spiritual development, one of the most important tenets of Integral Yoga as discussed in Chapter 1. The evolutionary process for Sri Aurobindo is one in which both the individual and all of humanity is implicated. He critiques the “old idea of rebirth” on the grounds of “an excessive individualism” (1998, 365). He writes about the classical doctrine of rebirth in disparaging terms which, “treated

¹⁷⁸ *Reincarnation and Karma*: <http://blavatskyarchives.com/blavatskykarmareincarnation.htm#%281%29>

¹⁷⁹ See Madame Blavatsky’s *Thoughts on Karma and Reincarnation*, available online here, http://www.katinkahesselink.net/blavatsky/articles/v11/y1889_020.htm

one's rebirth and *karma* as too much one's own single affair, a sharply separate movement in the whole [...] (and) taught the human being to see in life principally a condition and means of his own spiritual benefit and separate salvation (ibid).

By critiquing the idea of *karma* and rebirth as being solely concerned with the individual, Sri Aurobindo rejects the ethical claim of *karma* and rebirth on one's caste or class position, while positing that the soul progresses through successive births. He writes:

Rebirth is meaningless without *karma*, and *karma* has no fount of inevitable origin and no rational and no moral justification if it is not an instrumentality for the sequence of the soul's continuous experience [...] The continuous existence of the soul in rebirth must signify an evolution if not of the self, for that is said to be immutable, yet of its more outward active soul or self of experience. This evolution is not possible if there is not a connected sequence from life to life, a result of action and experience, an evolutionary consequence to the soul, a law of *Karma* (1998, 358-59).

Similar to Blavatsky, Sri Aurobindo modifies the classical *karma* theory. The insistence on viewing rebirth as a progressive movement of the soul is very different to the classical doctrine of *karma* and rebirth. The latter is embedded in a view of history, "precisely opposite to that of evolutionism, a view in which the world is constantly running down in cycles, being revived, and running down again" (Potter 1986, 113). Sri Aurobindo's views, to the contrary, are influenced by modern scientific theories of evolution, which he applies to matters of the soul in order to argue that the soul is constantly on an upward moving trajectory from one birth to the next. Secondly, he writes, "I have created by my past *karma* my own conditions and my relations with the life of others and the general *karma*" (Sri Aurobindo 1998, 365). According to Sri Aurobindo, one's own *karma* is inextricably bound with "general *karma*", such that the soul evolution of an individual is both affected by and affects the "collective soul" of entire mankind (Sri Aurobindo 1998, 364-65). Extending the *karma* doctrine to a communitarian understanding of humanity, Sri Aurobindo states that human beings are bound to one another, through collective *karma*, in the evolutionary process of spiritual development. Sri Aurobindo, therefore, moves away from the classical *karma* doctrine, creating a new discourse of *karma* and rebirth, which is more in tune with the ecumenical spiritual vocabulary of modern gurus. De-ethnicising and de-individualising concepts of *karma* and rebirth enable these doctrines to appeal to a wider range of non-Hindu seekers. Further, the idea of spiritual progression is one that accords well with the New Age emphasis on self-development and self-understanding affirming, "the indestructibility and continuity of the self" (Walter 2001, 24).

Many of my interlocutors frequently took recourse to notions of *karma* and rebirth for explaining why they thought they had eventually landed in India, their guru choice, and their feelings of being

at home in India. Shannon, a follower of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, narrated to me her deep-seated feeling of alienation while growing up in the United States. She said that about 6 years ago, she and her family had gone to their summer house, situated next to a lake. Shannon and her father decided to go for a short boating trip. A short while into their excursion, her father stood up, lost his balance and fell in the lake. Luckily, a fisherman rescued him and brought him to land. Shannon suggested to her father that he change his clothes and have a hot shower to recover. But he declined, saying, “No, no, just let me sit here for a while”. He said to Shannon that he had not been this stressed since the time they brought her home from the hospital, after she was born. What?! Shannon said in an incredulous tone, mimicking how she had reacted to her father at the time. Her father had never told her about this. He explained that when they brought her home from the hospital, she had cried for “three days straight”. Shannon laughed, as she recounted her father’s memory of her as a baby, and said, even as a new born baby she must have known that she had landed in the wrong place! Thus, she constructed her aberrant incarnation in the United States as evidence of not belonging there, even as she supported the inexplicable sense of feeling at home in India by saying, “I must have been born here in a past life, I don’t know”.

Similarly, Elena, whose story I had discussed in the previous chapter, said that when she first came to India in December 1973, all she saw around her was poverty and filth. Yet, when she returned to Germany a few months later, all she wanted to do was go back to India. She said she felt terribly “homesick” for India. Elena attributed her longing for India to a, “past life connection”. She sold all her furniture and other possessions in Germany within a period of 6 months and then relocated to India in 1975. To her, being able to sell everything and make all the necessary arrangements for relocating to India within just 6 months seemed as further proof her connection with India. Otherwise, she mused, she would not have been able to move to India within such a short span of time. Eva too had a similar interpretation for feeling at home in India. She said that she does not feel like a foreigner in India, “we [the Westerners] are here because we have a past life connection to India. That’s why we come back here”¹⁸⁰.

In these narratives of personal mythmaking, my interlocutors make sense of their dislocation from the West and relocation to India in terms of ontological and cosmological journeys of *karma* and rebirth, whereby one’s past life *karma* is deemed to be instrumental in charting life journeys elsewhere. Belief in *karma* provides a way of reading one’s journey to India as part of a greater, divine plan. Although many expatriates who travelled to India were in active pursuit of difference,

¹⁸⁰ See also Chapter 5 for a discussion of “return” at the soul level.

their retrospective narratives elide such motivations by citing the apperceived inevitability of their journeys. Personal agency is, thus, rendered irrelevant in these cosmological reinterpretations of travel to India. Moran (2004) notes similar deployment of, “*karma*, grace or divine design” among Western Buddhists as interpretive tools to explain their attraction to Buddhism and Nepal. Moran writes that these explanatory frameworks help making sense of the unknowability of life. He says that it is not, “necessarily unreasonable to explain events by recourse to *karma*, grace or divine design, any more than it would be to see one’s life as a long series of completely random events, caused, if one can call it that, by the mysterious black box known as ‘chance’. Without such explanatory frames, life is surely unknowable” (ibid, 114). At the same time, the lack of emphasis on one’s agency keeps one from acknowledging the global asymmetries and consumptive ethos which are necessarily some of the enabling factors in people’s journeys to and lives in economically less developed countries where spiritual lifestyles (requiring one to be unemployed as in the case of the *ashram* or employed in such jobs which leave “free” time to pursue meditation and yoga) can be maintained more easily.

Further, Moran argues that his interlocutors reflected on their lives, through the lens of *karma* and grace, with hindsight, albeit, “hindsight with a difference, a way of interpreting the past that is already informed by the dominant narratives and tropes of Tibetan Buddhism” (ibid). On a similar note, one can argue that my interlocutors’ retrospective narratives are not created in a historical-cultural vacuum, rather both popular culture and the historical creation of spiritual India, as discussed in previous chapters, inform personal stories featuring *karma* and rebirth. I believe that my interlocutors’, “attempt to create emotive bonds over the gap of difference, claims to similarity and true rapprochement” (Moran 2004, 116), should not be delegitimised or discounted. However, these narratives reflect the friction between, on the one hand, individual quest for meaning and the sincere feeling of belonging to India, and on the other, the romanticism of inferring one’s relocation to the exotic elsewhere as devoid of personal agency.

Cosmological reinterpretations of dislocations and relocations, for many of my interlocutors, are also means of recrafting their selves such that the self is no longer considered to be an individual separated from others. Rather, the self is recreated as meaningful through the interconnections with other people (most notably, the guru) and places (India) in an ongoing process spanning lifetimes. Most of my interlocutors were disenchanted with what they viewed to be a highly individualistic way of life in the West, where everyone was simply supposed to look out for oneself. In Chapter 2, I had mentioned Kiran’s expression of dismay with, “American society” where, “life’s just about

running around, stressing themselves out to make a lot of money, to have a big house, to have a big car, have a family and then die”. In the same interview, Kiran went on to say that none of this made any sense to her. Instead, she said, “from the time I was very little, I had a sense there was a much bigger picture to life. I had a sense that somehow we are all connected, like, I was the cosmos, I was space and somehow I had gotten captured in this tiny little closed body and I wanted to reconnect with that, my true nature”. Rejecting the isolationist individual position, Kiran viewed herself as being part of a much larger whole, “the cosmos”, where every being is connected with one another. The desire to know the true self, in her narrative, could only be fulfilled by acknowledging the metaphysical ties with other beings.

Karma and rebirth doctrines are compatible with such worldviews, whereby not only is one seen as connected with others, specifically the guru, but such connections are seen to transgress the temporal boundary of lifetimes. Amrita’s story exemplifies this. In the previous chapter I spoke of Amrita’s first engagement with Indian spirituality at Swami Muktananda’s *ashram* in Los Angeles. Amrita told me that although Baba was not there in person, when she saw Muktananda’s photo she immediately “recognised” him. Recall from the last chapter, Kiran also mentioned being “transfixed” when she saw Sri Ramana’s photograph at the meditation centre in London. How might one understand these powerful affective encounters with photographs? When explaining the relationship of viewers with photographs, if both the viewer and the photograph belong to the same cultural context, then, meanings generated from the act of viewing can be understood as culturally coded. For instance, “photos of gods” in India can be situated within the Hindu practice of *darshan* (Pinney 2004); photographs of Navajo men in New Mexico can be analysed through their insertion into the history of colonialism, domination and conflict (Romanek 2015); and photographs of people who died of AIDS in Uganda can be seen to perform a cathartic function for the bereaved (Vokes 2008). But how do we understand the approach of people to photographs in the context of my study where the viewer and the viewed (the guru in the photo-portraits) belong to different cultural universes, and where the guru may have been hitherto completely unknown to the viewer?

For some of my interlocutors, the explanation is through the notion of recognition, that is, the photograph stirring a memory from past lifetimes. Amrita surmised that she had a “*karmic* connection” with Muktananda since “who knows how many lifetimes”, a connection that was brought to bear on this lifetime through the immediate presence of the photograph. In this context, the discourse of *karma* and *karmic* connection, invokes a “chain of memory” (Hervieu-Léger 2000), resituating the seeker (photo-viewer) in an alternative religious worldview. Daniele Hervieu-Léger

(ibid) contends that religion is a form of meaning-making based on shared traditions, that is, past beliefs and participation in collective ways of being with a distinctive genealogy. However, in the Western world where traditional forms of religious belonging seem to be diluting, she argues, new forms of religiosity are emerging which focus on self-fulfilment and overcoming the experience of the self as fragmented. In the case of my interlocutors, taking recourse to the discourse of past life connection can be understood as invoking, “the authority of a tradition, becoming incorporated into a continuing lineage”, which, “constitutes one possible, post-traditional way of constructing self-identity among others, all of which call upon an individual’s affectivity and are fed on [...] his or her memories and longings” (Hervieu-Léger 2000, 165).

Themes of connection and inevitability (that is, the inevitability of journeying to India and the inevitability of arriving at one’s guru) are fortified through the notion of being called by the guru. When I asked Amrita, “how did you find Swami Muktananda?”, without a second’s hesitation she replied, “he found me”. Another interlocutor said to me in response to my question of why she went to her guru, “when the call comes, you just [have to] go”. In establishing their association with the guru as immutable - through the vocabulary of *karmic* connection, rebirth and calling - they create a new biographical history for themselves. The reconstruction of their identity as a renewed, connected self serves as an ontological departure from their lives in their countries of birth, where they were not only disenchanted with society but also disenchanted with the self.

For some of my interlocutors such as Yvonne, with whom I spent many pleasant evenings chatting in my guest house garden, research was my ostensible reason for going to Pondicherry, not the “real” one. The real reason, as Yvonne interpreted it, was cosmological. She believed that I had been “called” by the Mother. One evening as I was sitting with Yvonne in the guest house garden, the sound of ocean waves surrounding us, a friend of Yvonne’s stopped by to greet her. Seeing me with Yvonne, she started chatting with me, and asked why I was in Pondicherry. I said, “I am here for research”, to which Yvonne quickly responded, “That’s not your real reason for coming here. Tell her the real reason!” That made me laugh and I said to her friend, “I feel a connection with this place. So I guess research was a way to get here”.

To explain my statement: over time, I had acquired the term “connection” in my vocabulary. It was a word that, I found, worked as shorthand for explaining the feeling of comfort I felt in Pondicherry which I had never felt in Delhi. In that sense, I felt it was a stroke of good luck that I ended up choosing Pondicherry as my site of fieldwork instead of some other place. Further, my own response to some of my interlocutors’ interpretations - that I was called by the Mother - was

ambiguous owing to my upbringing in a cultural and familial milieu where stories of reincarnation and destiny (*bhagya*) are a commonplace, and where such stories are seen with both appreciation and suspicion. Consequently, I neither believed nor disbelieved my interlocutors' claims that I had been called there, and indeed my socio-cultural grounding made it impossible to dismiss them¹⁸¹. Thus, over time, my own arrival narrative weaved in registers of meaning that were both self-created and endowed by others, grounded in the present and retrospective, using a vocabulary that was legible to myself and others, part-unchanging and part-shifting depending on who was asking me my arrival narrative.

Yet, although I had adopted their interpretive lexicon of "connection" with Pondicherry, my reasons for feeling connected were rather prosaic. As mentioned earlier, I had grown up and lived most of my life in Delhi, a city which I found vibrant but extremely stressful and impersonal. The long distance between places – it took me almost 2 hours to reach my university from home – means you are travelling for long hours of the day, stuck in traffic jams, commuting in subway trains packed full of people with whom there is much jostling and shoving around, but not much conversation. Further, increase in acts of violence against women had greatly limited my mobility in the city making me feel restricted and unfree. In contrast, Pondicherry is a much smaller city, particularly the "French quarter" is designed in such a way that it is easy to walk around. I found it relatively safer to walk alone on the streets, without being assailed by feelings of anxiety as used to happen in Delhi. Besides, the ocean gave it a feeling of openness that I had missed in Delhi. I distinctly remember arriving in Pondicherry for the first time, reaching my guest house, enjoying the hint of coolness from the sea breeze, a far cry from the multi-storey buildings of my residential area in Delhi, and thinking to myself, "I can breathe here". These were my reasons for feeling connected with Pondicherry and I was glad that I had chosen Pondicherry for fieldwork.

But as mentioned before, my socio-cultural upbringing made it impossible for me to dismiss some of my interlocutors' reading of my arrival narrative as a spiritual-cosmological turn to Pondicherry. This, I believe, is reflected in my statement of "feeling a connection" with Pondicherry, which does leave the space open for my interlocutors to interpret it as a spiritual connection and for me to negotiate with such interpretations. Clearly, then, my own arrival narrative was malleable and

¹⁸¹ Raymond L.M. Lee (2010) succinctly captures, "the ambivalence of modernizing Asians toward disenchantment as a means of attaining world-mastery. For them, world-mastery is not just the empirical control of the external world, but the ability to experience and understand other realities" (359). Thus, while doing research on "spirit possession among urban, middle and working class Malays", one of them told him, "I don't believe in spirits but I'm afraid of them" (ibid).

projected a certain self to a certain audience. Similarly, for my interlocutors, their understanding of their self and the ways in which they explained this to others, as well as the ways in which they understood others' life events, are deeply impacted by their life in Pondicherry, where the discursive tropes of *karma*, connection and calling are particularly important interpretive tools within circles of like-minded people for narrating and, thus, recreating the self¹⁸².

Conclusion

Narcotics cannot still the tooth
That nibbles at the soul

- Emily Dickinson, *This World is Not Conclusion*

Is the modern self doomed? Forever locked in the “iron cage”, using Max Weber’s phrase, of rationality, individualism and secularity? Is there no way out? These are some of the questions that my interlocutors seemed to have been grappling with before they began their journey East. The modern Western (hu)man, Dean MacCannell (1999) argues, travels to the non-West in search of authenticity since the non-West symbolises the pre-modern and, therefore, authentic past now lost to the West. Still, as I have argued in the previous chapters, the creation of the pre-modern elsewhere is one of modernity’s enchantments. By extension, the panacea to modernity’s discontents that are seen to afflict the soul lies in characteristically modern solutions – the active reconstruction of one’s identity through spiritual affiliation with a guru whose discourses are a product of *these* times, the emphasis on experientiality as the bedrock of personal beliefs, and the reinterpretation of Hindu doctrines to enable cross-cultural meanderings of people and ideas.

Along with the consumptive practice of guru choice, exists the possibility of redefining oneself as more meaningful through the choices one makes. And yet, there exists the possibility, in transnational movements of people across the politically asymmetrical terrains of East and West, to redefine those very choices as no-choice. Notions of *karma*, connection and calling resituate the arrival narratives such that these are no longer narratives of arrival at a new or strange place¹⁸³.

¹⁸² However, their re-creation of the self is not limited to narrative or discursive frames. For followers of Sri Aurobindo and Mother, *karma* yoga insists on *sadhana* (spiritual practice) through work.

¹⁸³ Although as in the discussion of the moments of reckoning, it was precisely the strangeness of India that continues to reverberate in the retellings of their early days in the country. However, since *karma* is associated with the inner core of one’s self, such cultural differences can be dismissed as merely external phenomena. The “inner versus outer” distinction is discussed in the next chapter.

Rather it signals the return of the soul to a place of familiarity and belonging. The external – biological and cultural – outsider is remade through the discourse of *karma*, connection and calling into the authentic insider. By recovering the lost foundations of one's being, one lays claim not only to the true home of the soul, but effects a return to the lost primordial universal foundation through the soul's spiritual evolution. How such claims might translate into elitism in the context of everyday life in India forms the subject matter of the next chapter, where I argue that narratives of *karmic* connections, in the case of some, can lead to essentialist criticisms of the Indian "outer" life seen to be contradictory to the spiritual "inner" life that they claim authentic insidership to. I will contend that the transcendental connections forged through notions of *karma* and rebirth can alienate people from everyday Indians in their humdrum daily routines. I believe that my interlocutors were genuinely touched by their guru and that they genuinely believe that their journey to India was no mere chance or calculative choice. But it has been my endeavour here to bring out the tensions that underscore the processes of re-enchanting the self as meaningful, straddling the East and the West, the church and the *ashram*, and personal aspirations and their collective articulations.

Chapter 5. At Home in India? The Enchantments and Disenchantments of Life in the Elsewhere

Introduction

Sometime in 1939, Arthur Osborne (1906-1970)¹⁸⁴, English disciple and biographer of Sri Ramana Maharshi, arrived in India for the first time. In his autobiographical notes, published posthumously, Osborne (2001) writes, “*As soon as I reached India I had the peculiar feeling of being at home for the first time in my life. I had never felt really at home in England but had always intended to make my living abroad. Neither had I felt at home in Poland or Siam*” (55, emphasis added).

Osborne’s feeling of being at home in India, written more than seven decades ago, closely resembles the sense of belonging that many of my interlocutors claimed they felt as soon as they arrived in India. They spoke of an inexplicable sense of having arrived at a place where they were meant to be. Their feeling of belonging to India reinforced deep seated sentiments of alienation from their country of origin, retrospectively justifying their departure, in their eyes, as a necessary step in their life-journey toward self-fulfilment. In this chapter I will examine such narratives, which I had grown accustomed to hearing in the course of collecting people’s arrival narratives. What did they mean when they said that they feel at home in India?

I will argue in the first section of this chapter that for my interlocutors, it was as if their arrival at India had finally ended their life of spiritual exile in their countries of birth and upbringing. Their narratives demonstrate nostalgia for the universal spiritual foundation which some thought was lost in the West. But the modern quest for the anti or pre-modern through the apperceived ancient

¹⁸⁴ I have not come across academic texts on Osborne and his turn toward Ramana. However, his writings on Sri Ramana are quoted as source material in several academic texts on the Indian guru. Osborne’s writings have certainly broadened Sri Ramana’s appeal to English speaking audiences. In his autobiography, Osborne records having studied at Oxford College, but says that he was dissatisfied with intellectual pursuits; rather he was looking for spiritual guidance. He toyed with the idea of joining a Catholic monastery, but says that at the time the spiritual impulse in him was too weak and he was not ready to enter a monastic order. However, he continued to be interested in the question of self-realisation. Osborne says that he started reading books by the French metaphysical writer Rene Guenon (1886-1951) which piqued his interest in Eastern mysticism. Guenon, Osborne writes, insisted that seekers find a guru to advance on their spiritual path. Eventually, Osborne went to Thiruvanamallai to meet some fellow-members of a group of people who followed Guenon’s writings. It was here that Osborne met Sri Ramana Maharshi and became his disciple (see Osborne 2001).

timelessness of India's spiritual traditions constructs an imagined, hyperreal India, temporally far-removed from the West. As an example of such temporal distantiation, in the second section, I focus on a collective reading of one of Sri Aurobindo's most complex poems, *Savitri*. The reading demonstrates the ways in which India's Vedic past is invoked in the present as a sign of India's spiritual heritage.

For Western seekers, living in India for several decades and encountering everyday life there, brings in sharp relief the realities of mundane life in India against the ideal imaginaries. What, then, are the disenchantments of living in the elsewhere for several decades? How are these made sense of? Osborne (2001) goes on to say in his memoir, "It was not that I preferred the Indians – indeed, the gay cheerfulness of the Chinese shopkeepers in Bangkok was something that I missed in the Indian shops. Nor were the parts of India I then visited particularly beautiful -dusty, sun-bleached plains, dilapidated villages, bleak, white-washed houses. There was simply the indefinable feeling that I belonged here, that this was home" (55). Like Osborne, some of my interlocutors too felt that apart from spirituality, Indian life had nothing much to offer them. The neo-Orientalist extraction of the supposed essence of Indian spirituality from the everyday life of local Indians leads to spiritual elitism, which is discussed in section three, where I analyse the narratives which dichotomise an "inner" spiritual life to an "outer" cultural life. While the former constitutes the basis of their "soul" connection, the latter is rejected by some as merely undesirable outward appearances. The disenchantments of outer life fall in line with some of my interlocutors' critiques of the growing materialism in India and the supposed dissolution of the inner spirit. This discussion is undertaken in the fourth section.

Finally, I look at the utopian futurism of many of my interlocutors who believe that the current chaotic state of the world is simply a stage in the process of spiritual evolution. They hope for a future in which everyone will have a higher spiritual consciousness and it is in this future world that they envisage the connected self, discussed in the last chapter, to finally arrive home. Through these sections, the chapter aims to demonstrate the contradictions inherent in making home in the spatio-temporal elsewhere of India, at odds with the lived realities of its proximate here-and-the-now.

Home (Elsew)here: The end of exile

I was headed towards India. That was our goal and I kept it even after I parted with the friend that brought me on the way [...] I went from Greece through Turkey, Iran Afghanistan, Kabul, and then through Pakistan and finally I arrived in July of 1971 on the borders of India. It was the land of my salvation, it was where I was meant to be and that's

where I am and have been for the past 42 years. I felt at home as soon as I crossed the border (Jerry).

In many of my conversations with Western expatriates in Pondicherry, there was often the evocation of home when talking about India: how they felt at home “as soon as” they crossed the border, or realised soon after coming to India that it was their home. Jed, an Australian *ashramite*, spoke to me about his overland travels through Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand on his way to India. He said he lived in Phuket for a few months. It was a beautiful place, he said, where the ocean was crystal clear. “But that did not hold me [...] My objective was to go to India”. He trekked through the Himalayas in Nepal, reminiscing about its grandeur, but that too, he said, “could not keep me”. Finally, he entered India in 1979, and reached Pondicherry in August of the same year. Then, he said, “I stayed put”. Jed, like Jerry, had arrived home.

The usual travel trajectory is that of leaving home/the familiar, journeying into the strange unknown, and then returning home. In contemporary travel, Marilyn Ivy (1995) writes, “The very idea of leaving home – traveling – to find home has not gone unremarked by those caught up in following the figure of the journey and the ways in which it redoubles the narrative trajectory of the will to knowledge. ‘Home’ marks the necessary starting point and point of return without which travel is unimaginable” (30). Nelson Graburn (1989) directs us to the home/travel binary contained in the etymology of the word “vacation”, “The very word vacation comes from the Latin *vacare*, ‘to leave (one’s house) empty’, and emphasizes the fact that we cannot properly vacation at home” (23). Thus, travel occurs away from home which, “both demands and domesticates the desire for a return to the starting point” (Ivy 1995, 31). While home is visualised as the place of the static and the ordinary, contemporary discourses of travelling emphasise journeys away from home as a means to, “restore something that is lacking” (Curtis and Pajaczkowska 1994, 204) in the everyday spaces of work and home (Graburn 1989).

Writing about the tourism campaign of Japan in which the tourist is exhorted to discover their inner self by travelling through rural Japan, Ivy (1995) surmises, “Travel is the means to rediscover and recover this lost self: “Discover Myself” becomes the equivalent of Discover Japan. Travel and that which it discovers – a lost personal self, a culturally authentic Japan – becomes the antithesis of contemporary, urban everyday” (41). In effect, the tourist is called upon to discover himself or herself through an encounter with the Other – whether this be in the form of Japanese exotica for international tourists or the exoticised rural landscape for the domestic urban tourist. As discussed in the previous chapters, precisely such an impulse to discover and realise the self through journeying into the unknown mysterious world that India represented to them, underscored many of

my interlocutors' motivations for travel. However, it is the home which acts as the regulator of the inexhaustible, chaotic world of the elsewhere. Georges van den Abbeele (1980) writes, "The very concept of 'the voyage' is this domestication in that it demarcates one's traveling like the Aristotelian plot into a beginning, a middle, and an end. In the case of the tourist, the beginning and the end are the same place, 'home'. It is in relation to this home or *domus* then that everything which falls into the middle can be 'domesticated'" (9).

However, my interlocutors' assertions of finding home *in* the travel destination interrupt the usual travel trajectory. In other words, unlike other travellers, for them the strange becomes or appears to be familiar. In my interlocutors' narratives, the home of departure is *not* that of return, it is one which is permanently and wilfully left behind, "in order to discover an even more fundamental home amidst the strange" (Moran 2004, 111). Similar feelings of finding home in what was properly the realm of the voyage has been talked about in recent literature on lifestyle migration¹⁸⁵. Catherine Therrien (2013) explores the motivations and desires of European migrants settled in Morocco, who describe their life in Europe as unfulfilling for a variety of reasons including discontentment with career, personal feelings of unbelonging with family, or just sheer dissatisfaction with everyday life. In contrast, their sojourn to Morocco turns into an extended stay as they recreate it as their home. Similar stories of disenchantment with life in the familiar, known world are detailed in the context of British retirees living in Spain (Benson 2009), European migrants in Varanasi, India (Korpela 2009; 2010), and European "global nomads" in Goa, India and Ibiza, Spain (D'Andrea 2007). In the previous chapters, I spoke of the feelings of alienation that my interlocutors recounted when explaining why they embarked on their journey to India: the social pressures to conform to a life of career and family, their personal experiences of being unable to find a teacher or counsel who could answer their existential questions, and their dissatisfaction with the church. In other words, they felt that the external conditions of their life and their inner state-of-being were mismatched.

Certainly Edward Said (2001) was not thinking of people such as my interlocutors when he wrote that, "exile [...] is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (173). However, in looking back at some of my expatriate interlocutors' life in their country of birth and upbringing, it seems as if they were in exile *there* while *here*, in the strange elsewhere of India, was/is home. Srinivas (2010) also records some of her interlocutors expressing their sense of spiritual exile when away from Sathya Sai Baba's *ashram* in Puttuparthi.

¹⁸⁵ See Introduction.

Their narratives of alienation from their own society portray their lives there as exilic, that is, “in a discontinuous state of being” (Said 2001, 177). Whereas for the exile, the return home is “hopelessly deferred” (Curtis and Pajaczkowska 1994, 215), for some of my interlocutors, the exilic condition of living in an unhomely place ends with the journey into the exotic elsewhere rediscovered as home. Thus, the home elsewhere marks the end of spiritual exile, and in that sense signals true homecoming. As in the case of Therrien’s (2013) respondents, it is the desire for elsewhere, for difference, that often underlies attempts to find home amidst the strange. Narratives of finding and being-at-home in India compel us to rethink Ivy’s (1995) and van den Abbeele’s (1980) contention that home functions as the domesticator of voyage. Instead, I argue that turning the elsewhere into home is the means, par excellence, of domesticating the elsewhere, breaking through its strangeness in order to claim true insidership, which when posited as “more authentic” belonging vis-a-vis the locals leads to spiritual elitism (see below). The voyage also becomes domesticated in an inverse fashion, as that which leads away from the rejected old home to the new, renamed home. In the context of my study, this interpretation is bolstered by their assertions of *karmic* connection with India which implies a “return” to India at the soul level in this life undercutting cultural “externalities”.

To recapitulate briefly, in the last chapter, we saw Shannon interpreting her birth in the United States as an instance of being born in the wrong place. Elena substantiated her feelings of having a past life connection to India with feelings of homesickness for India when she went back to Germany after her first visit to India. Along the same lines, Amrita emphasised her belonging to India in terms of *karma*:

India is central to my being. It’s central to my being insofar as even just as a person living here with nothing to do with spirituality, it just feels like home to me, always has. It is on a spiritual level, on the level of my destiny and on the level of the unfolding of my spiritual life and fulfilment. It’s been the only place where I’ve gotten that kind of support and guidance that’s allowed me to unearth what’s been buried in my being [...] I am so at home in India. I can’t explain it on any other level other than I’ve probably lived so many lifetimes here. And feel much more at home and in my place here than I do anywhere else on the planet. So this is also *karma*. These things are mysterious but on another level, they are not so. It’s obvious to me as someone with experiences of being here and travelling here and spending so much time and coming so often. Why every time I had enough money to buy a ticket my first thought was ‘ok, let’s go to India’? [Laughs gleefully, as if to say, ‘where else would I want to go?!’] I never wanted to be anywhere but here.

The discourse of *karmic* connection to India renders it intimately familiar, even though the everyday life, at a cultural level, is radically different to the known surroundings in which the expatriates grew up. To Amrita, however, despite not knowing Tamil, the everyday world of her

neighbourhood in the Vaithikuppam region, where she rented a small flat, seemed neither strange nor difficult to navigate. She had made friends with the landlord, and had cheerful acquaintance with her neighbours. But the connection with India was also at a much deeper level for her as well as for others. India, as home, signals finally coming home to the authentic self, so that finding home in India, “provokes recognition of an inner [...] (authentic) identity, an ultimate home in the world” (Moran 2004, 111). It is here that the self is fully realised, for some through meeting the guru, and for others through engagement with various streams of Indian spirituality. India is rediscovered as the true home through the rediscovery of the self in a simultaneous, interlocked mapping of outward travel on the landscape of inner journey, and vice versa.

Thus, India emerges as the real home of the soul for many Western spiritual practitioners, “the space from which one imagines oneself to have originated” (Ahmed 2000, 77), and to which they *return* in this life. In the last chapter, I touched upon the importance of narrating one’s life story to the construction of the self in which one imagines the past through, “histories of movement and dislocation [...] The question then of being-at-home or leaving home is always a question of memory, of the discontinuity between past and present” (Ahmed 2000, 90-91). The stories of dislocation from the unhomely country of birth is seen through the lens of *karma* as an inevitable event in the scheme of relocating to where they are meant to be. The past operates in multiple ways in these life-stories. Past lifetimes’ connection to India is seen to be rudely interrupted by the immediate past of *this* lifetime spent in another country through the accident of birth. The discontinuity between the past and present of this lifetime, then, is a necessary condition for aligning this lifetime’s present with the *karma* of past lifetimes.

Such “ ‘belated romance’ with the past, through memory heightened by distance” (Kaplan 1996, 39), is characteristic of exile, and exilic nostalgia for home, “rooted in the notion that that it is ‘natural’ to be at ‘home’ and that separation from that location can never be assuaged by anything but return” (ibid, 33). While in the *karma* discourse, the individual soul longs to return home to the place of its supposed previous births, there is a broader level at which India represents home to my expatriate interlocutors. It is home, my interlocutors’ narratives suggest, to the universal ancient spirituality now lost in the West. As one of them said, “There is something missing, missing, from our point of view in the West”, or as a German woman put it, “There is an entire dimension missing in the West”. What is missing in the West – responses to this question were varied, although they revolved around some common themes: the West is too “mental” as in intellectual instead of being more “heart” oriented, the West is too “materialistic”, the West is too secular or the spiritual connection has been lost through the hierarchical order of the church. India, in contrast, was seen by

some expatriates as *different*, although some of them felt that India is changing as in becoming materialistic¹⁸⁶. But the overwhelming response was that India has something that the West has lost¹⁸⁷, and is, therefore, not only an alternative to the West but the true home of lost spirituality. The nostalgic positioning of the, “‘once was’ in relation to a ‘now’ creates a frame of meaning” (Stewart 1988, 227), within which spiritual India reaches its full fruition as the soul’s true home.

Nostalgia, Svetlana Boym (2001) writes, “is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sense of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy” (7)¹⁸⁸. Boym (ibid) contends that temporality is integral to nostalgia. Despite its antimodern ethos, nostalgia is coeval with modernity, whereby modernity’s supposed rupture with the pre-modern past leads to mourning, “for the loss of an ‘enchanted world’” (ibid, 12). In the modern construction of teleological history where progress is charted along a linear path, something, it seems, has been irrecoverably lost to which the moderns look “back” and long for. The quest for the non-modern, Dean MacCannell (1999) argues, is a central concern of modernity, such that the modern is defined against that which is considered non-modern. Or as Baudrillard suggests the, “modern is ‘cold’ and the antique and the exotic are ‘warm’ because contemporary mythology places the latter objects in a childhood remote from the abstractions of contemporary consumer society” (cited in Stewart 1993, 146). Nostalgia for the “vanishing” world, even though it appears to be longing for a place, is actually, “a yearning for a different time” (Boym 2001, 8). In Chapter 2, I touched upon the aspect of spatial distance that India is characterised by, which prompted many of my interlocutors to travel to India for its cultural differences and sense of adventure. Even as India is spatially distant, it is also constructed by my interlocutors as temporally distant from the West. The temporal distance of India from the West is constructed through viewing India as belonging to the past in a teleological scheme of technological development¹⁸⁹. Further, as the narratives below demonstrate, the past is seen to continue to be alive in the fabric of present day Indian life.

The nostalgic yearning for a return to the spiritual homeland implying a critique of modernity, dissatisfied with what it seems to offer, is anything but new. Romantic Orientalist representations of

¹⁸⁶ Attitudes to India’s aspiring materialism varied from person to person. I have discussed the changing face of India later in this chapter.

¹⁸⁷ However, there were others who posited that the West never had those teachings. See Kiran’s narrative, this chapter.

¹⁸⁸ The word nostalgia is derived from the Greek “nostos” meaning “returning home” and “algia” meaning “longing” (Boym 2001)

¹⁸⁹ Discussed later in this chapter.

India as the cradle of civilization, and the insertion of the mystic East into the spiritual annals of Theosophy and the wider spiritual discourse, as discussed in Chapter 1, provide the historical backdrop to contemporary nostalgia for Indian spirituality (King 1999a; Halbfass 1988). Much of the contemporary discourse of India's spiritual heritage, rather than departing from Orientalist conceptions, continues to take recourse to it even though the historicity of the discourse is effaced or rarely acknowledged in everyday talk¹⁹⁰. Based on the narratives, I argue, India is constructed as temporally distant from the West because it is held that there is not a stark rupture between its (spiritual-religious) past and present which is amply manifest in its everyday life, whereas in the West, my interlocutors argued, the religious past is separated from its secular present, or as others argued, the spiritual core of the past is separated from the religious paraphernalia in the present times¹⁹¹.

However, "the search for a past and a place leads them to reconstitute their lives in a narrative form, a story designed to reassemble a broken history into a new whole. The world created there is a world unnatural and unreal; it resembles fiction or dream" (Stewart 1988, 236). Or as Susan Stewart (1993) puts it, "Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent" (23). In other words, the past that India is envisaged to embody is, to use Baudrillard (1994), a hyperreal India, a simulated model of apperceived reality without origin or historical facticity. Perhaps, one could go even further to suggest that it is hyperreal nostalgia, for the nostalgia is for something that never existed but is taken to be more real than what exists in the here-and-now. By inserting themselves into this mythic spiritual India, and into the mythic past of India's spirituality which is also deemed to be the world's lost spiritual past, some of my interlocutors – in continuation of the theme of authenticating oneself– end their exile by coming home to themselves in a simulated India. In a later section in this chapter, I will point to the strains that emerge as the ideal hyperreal India collides with the reality of everyday life.

¹⁹⁰ As Bender (2010) notes in the case of New Age spiritual practitioners in New England, when on rare occasions they did mention a historical figure such as William James, "it was to call attention to a shared and timeless quest for knowledge, and not to place themselves within a conventional historical trajectory that included earlier figures such as these" (4). In my case, some of my interlocutors would sometimes mention the likes of Paul Brunton and Mircea Eliade, to point to their quest for universal truth, without much regard for the problematic politics of their spiritual journey.

¹⁹¹ See "departing from Christianity" in the previous chapter. Also, not all my interlocutors participated in the religious practices of the local people. Despite citing the presence of religiosity in the fabric of Indian life, some desisted from "becoming Indian". I have discussed this later in the chapter in the sections entitled "The ambivalences of home: the inner versus the outer divide", and "Indian materialism, Western spirituality".

India is created as temporally distant from the West because it is seen to have somehow managed to hold on to the ancient, eternal spiritual truth. The alternative that India poses is an alternative where the pre-modern (or what is seen as pre-modern) is very much a part of the modern present, while the quest for the pre-modern is in itself a distinctly modern pursuit. Just how India has managed to keep the spiritual essence was unclear in the narratives. But broadly speaking, most people attributed it to the ancientness of Indic metaphysical and spiritual traditions, including the huge corpus of scriptures such as the Vedas, and institutions such as *ashrams* and guru-*shishya* lineages. This knowledge and these traditions, my interlocutors suggested, are so old that they are entrenched in Indian society, even in the face of a rapidly globalising, consumerist India.

Again and again, the juxtaposition of India's ancient spiritual heritage and its dynamic present day society arose in the narratives of expatriate spiritual practitioners. Sally was one of the few people who unabashedly supported the aspirations of Westward looking Indian middle classes. However, even those who were critical of Indians' "imitation" of the West (discussed later in this chapter), in consumerist ideals for instance, believed that "the ground is still there [...] the soul is still there". Kiran thought that while not everyone in India and elsewhere was entirely devoted to a spiritual life, yet the Indian teachings are there for anyone to turn to:

And so what I'm saying is yeah there's something in India where it would certainly you know, I mean long, long periods in Indian history where these questions [of why are we here on earth, what's the point of all this etc.] were very large. And of course the average person probably was never sitting in meditation but many people, you know, there were so many swamis and *r̥ṣis* and yogis and somehow in the culture, it permeates. Even if, even if people are just living a household life but somehow, that's not so much anymore, but even when I first arrived, there was a deep quest for that, a genuine quest for truth and there's somehow a deep knowledge that there is more to life than material life. So even if these Indians who are very material, but there's something in the heritage that makes it impossible not to know that there's much more to life than just buying things. Many turn their back on it but somehow it's there in the heritage, that culture to turn back to. It's still possible to go back to Patanjali, to Buddhism, to Bhagavad Gita, it's all there, it's still there. It's much harder to find a genuine teacher now¹⁹², that's for sure but still those teachings are there and if someone's really sincere then they'll find their way to those teachings whereas in other cultures, in Western cultures those teachings never existed.

The ancientness of the scriptures, epics and metaphysical thought were one of the most cited reasons for India's inherent spirituality by people I spoke to. Also, like Kiran, for other interlocutors too, the history of seers and ascetics as both embodiments of those "teachings" and conveyors of it, was crucial in marking India as different and spiritually superior to the West. The wide range of

¹⁹² See previous chapter for the importance of personal experience for determining who is a genuine guru. The issue of deciding who is a genuine guru also attests to guru choice, for which see Chapter 3.

teachings, what Kiran in a later conversation referred to as “paths”, further added to the spiritual dynamism of the country. Thus, Kiran was echoing the sentiments of several other people when she said that even if Indians themselves choose a different life style, one which values materialism over spirituality, the traditions are so deeply entrenched that one need only look around them to find the teachings. However, it is not as if every one of my interlocutors believed that spiritual teachings did not exist in the West. Johann, as I had mentioned in the Introduction, admired Meister Eckhart, and another German interlocutor spoke highly of Rudolf Steiner¹⁹³.

However, the availability of choice, which Kiran alluded to, is neither ahistorical nor outside structural frames. Not everyone can choose from the range of spiritual paths available, due to structural constraints of caste which might determine who is revered as a guru and whose teachings followed within certain caste groups. Further, as Warriar (2005) shows in the case of middle class Indian devotees of Amma, the teachings of modern gurus are often articulated in very simple language and deal with the mundane crises of everyday life making these particularly easy to follow, and easier still to cross-over from the teachings of one guru to another. The various spiritual teachings which trace their spiritual authority to revered texts such as the Vedas, the Bhagavad Gita¹⁹⁴, and the more abstract “history” of seers and sages suit the needs of modern devotees, even as devotees recreate these paths through their choice, that is, by interpreting these teachings differently, applying these to their life in various ways, and disseminating them by word of mouth to others¹⁹⁵. The teachings, then, are not just *there*, they are made available in a range of ways¹⁹⁶ to suit the needs of modern seekers. In other words, the proliferation of options, be it gurus or teachings in general, is a result of the modern “demand” for ancient teachings from the East.

¹⁹³ Steiner (1861-1925) was an Austrian philosopher and educationist who had dabbled in Theosophy, and later was foundational to the establishment of the Anthroposophical Society which combined Western and Eastern esoteric thought. Steiner’s vision also underlies the worldwide network of Waldorf schools which emphasise nurturing students’ creativity and imagination. For an analysis of Steiner’s thought, see Staudenmaier 2008.

Clearly, though, even when referring to Western teachings, my interlocutors were referring to those theologians, philosophers or writers whose thought is regarded as mystical and/or esoteric.

¹⁹⁴ One of the most popular sections of the Mahabharata set on a battlefield revolving on the questions of social duty and moral obligations.

¹⁹⁵ Warriar (2005) describes the variety of spiritual practices among Amma’s devotees ranging from meditation, *bhajan* singing, reciting parts of the Ramayana and chanting mantras.

¹⁹⁶ Popular culture has played a huge role in interpreting and disseminating “ancient” teachings to television viewers in India. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata were two of the longest and most successful television productions on state-sponsored channels (see van der Veer 1994). In more recent times, private television channels specifically dedicated to spiritual teachings have become very popular. Televangelism and the popularisation of yoga gurus such as Baba Ramdev have been explored by Santanu Chakrabarti (2012).

Besides, choice takes on different connotations when placed within the context of travel and the continuing spiritualisation of India. As Amrita said:

So, listen, India is a different experience for foreigners than it is for Indians. In the same way America would be a different experience for Indians than it would be for Americans. Wherever you are a foreigner you have much more freedom because you are free of your own cultural biases and people and their expectations of you that you need to perform up to. You come to a place where nobody knows you, you do your thing, you know you can be who you are in a way you can't be when you are in the middle of where people have certain expectations of you.

Travelling to a different place and living there among people other than family and friends, as Amrita stated, affords the freedom of choice that is not necessarily available to the locals and to foreigners in their own country where they have to live up to the social norms within given social structures. For those privileged enough to travel and settle elsewhere, the liminal condition of making home among strangers offers further lifestyle privileges of more freedom and anonymity. But at the same time, as I have discussed in this thesis, the choice of Indian spirituality is made available in particular ways historically, which shapes its availability and the plethora of choices in present times. In choosing to live in India, if the choice gets framed in terms of a spiritual life, it is crucial to remind ourselves that this vocabulary is warranted by the historical creation of spiritual India, translated into its spatial and temporal distance from the West.

Reading *Savitri*: The eternal flame of the past

Of the devotees of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother whom I met, Sri Aurobindo's philosophy which he himself emphasised was "not inconsistent with the old Vedantic truth" (Sri Aurobindo quoted in Heehs 2008, 268), is most important. His devotees gain an understanding of the ancient Vedas through Sri Aurobindo's elucidations of these. Sri Aurobindo has written extensively on the Vedas, and translated and interpreted them. In his book, *The Secret of the Veda*, Sri Aurobindo interpreted the Rg Veda, "the most ancient and least understood scripture in the Indian tradition" (Heehs 2008, 265). The Vedas are compositions of hymns around sacrificial, ceremonial rites. However, Sri Aurobindo asserted that, although at first glance the Vedas seem to be simply annals of sacrificial verses, they are in fact much more than that. Underlying the external layer of exoteric practices, he insisted, the Vedas contained hymns dedicated to the inner spiritual truth (Heehs 2008).

Sri Aurobindo's writings are replete with references to the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. As Heehs (ibid) points out, Sri Aurobindo was not unaware of the fact that it was impossible to pin down the exact meaning of the Vedas since the message contained in them, in part, was a product of its time and society. Yet, he held, the other element of the message was immutable,

eternal truth. It is to this eternal truth of the Vedas that Sri Aurobindo purports to speak through his ideas. *Ashramites* and non-*ashramites*, in keeping with Sri Aurobindo's teachings, and their personal interpretations of these teachings, often spoke of the Vedas as the most ancient wisdom, and of Sri Aurobindo's teachings as further, forward looking work on the Vedic knowledge. They saw Sri Aurobindo as continuing in the long tradition of seers and *ṛṣis* in India, and carrying forward the ancient teachings. However, it is not as if there is any one, singular interpretation of the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. This is especially true of Sri Aurobindo's writings which can be dense and opaque, thus, inviting commentaries from writers within the *ashram* and outside, lay as well as academic. Individual interpretations of his writings varied from person to person, but most of my interlocutors felt that they had been indelibly touched by his writings.

I was meeting Jed in the *ashram* school on a balmy Pondicherry morning. Jed has been living in Pondicherry for almost 40 years now. When I spoke to him, he had been working on a glossary of Sanskrit terms used in the Vedas. I mentioned that I have not read the Vedas, only Paul Deussen's translation of the Upanisads. Jed said that the Upanisads are easier to understand because they are written in a way that the mind can grasp it. In that sense you can call it philosophy, he continued, but the Vedas are, "songs of spiritual experience, it's music". Jed is adept at Sanskrit and has read some of the Vedas in Sanskrit. But, he told me, if I read Sri Aurobindo's *Secret of the Veda*, then I shall understand the beauty of the Vedas, something that had clearly moved him. He mentioned Sri Aurobindo's rejection of Sayana's¹⁹⁷ commentary on the Rg Veda, finding them inadequate. Instead, Sri Aurobindo interpreted the Vedas in terms of their spiritual significance. Jed said, he always tries to remember that Sri Aurobindo emphasised the importance of the Vedas and the Upanisads in his works.

Sri Aurobindo was a prolific writer and the *ashram* has its own press and bookshops that make his texts available to those interested. Sri Aurobindo wrote only in English, given he was educated in England and was most comfortable writing in English (Heehs 2008). His writings have been translated in many other European languages including German, French and Italian, as well as several Indian languages such as Bengali, Gujarati and Oriya.

Despite the devaluation of intellectual pursuits as being too "mental" as opposed to "heart oriented" by many of my interlocutors, *ashramites* and non-*ashramite* disciples spend a considerable amount of time reading Sri Aurobindo. *The Secret of the Veda*, *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, and

¹⁹⁷ Sayana was a 14th century commentator of the Rg Veda who read the Veda in terms of the literal, sacrificial rites.

his epic poem *Savitri*, none of them easy reads, were mentioned to me time and again by Jed and others. These were some of the texts that had most influenced them. These texts, they felt, explained the key ideas of Sri Aurobindo's teachings, which were an expression of spiritual plenitude and vast enough to bring together the Vedas and the Upanisads. If, for several Western devotees, the Vedas represented the heart of Indian spirituality, then, it is also true that, for them, through Sri Aurobindo's teachings it beat to a different rhythm. They considered Sri Aurobindo's teachings a means of bringing the past into the here-and-now. The issue of temporality, as in the Vedic past and its inextricability with the present, came up one day in a public reading group. Like everything else, the issue of temporal distance was something that those present at the reading, as much as I, grappled with. The narratives on the following pages show different ways of reconciling that distance in order to render it more proximate.

In the *ashram* and Auroville, study groups are held regularly to discuss Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's texts. Their writings guide many followers in their daily life as well as in their practice of yoga. Pillai (2005) notes, in the case of Aurovillians, that there are different attitudes toward the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Similarly, *ashramite* and non-*ashramite* followers of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother approach their writings in diverse ways. For some, these teachings are like a religious canon, "endowed with an aura of sacredness which derives both from the original seers, *r̥sis*, prophets or teachers who formulated the message, and from the eternal truth which is thought to be encapsulated in the text of the canonical structure" (Stietencron cited in Pillai 2005, 142). For many followers, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's writings represent a divine message tied to India's ancient spiritual teachings, even improving the latter. For others, these are profound philosophical texts, but not necessarily inviolable or the "best". These texts, for them, supplement other philosophical texts, which taken together inform their eclectic spiritual repertoire. For instance, Johann, the German follower of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, was equally impressed by the writings of Nisargadatta Maharaj¹⁹⁸, an Indian guru of non-dualism.

Whatever the approach to the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, overall these texts form an important part of my interlocutors' lives who regularly read them in order to derive spiritual sustenance. Writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are also a visible part of the collective life of

¹⁹⁸ Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897-1981) was born in a family of modest economic means in Bombay (what is now called Mumbai). Nisargadatta taught the non-dualist understanding of the self as being part of the universal Self (*brahman*). His teachings reached a wider audience with the publication of the English translation of his talks entitled *I Am That* (1973) by Maurice Frydman, a Polish Jewish refugee in India who also actively participated in Gandhi's Indian independence movement.

the *ashram*: quotes from their texts are written on chalk-boards outside the *ashram* dining hall, snippets or images of the Mother's handwritten messages are displayed in various guest houses, and the readings are often quoted – as people remember and interpret them – in conversations with others. People engage with the texts, both in the privacy of their home and in small reading groups. Amongst my interlocutors, I found that the former method was more common. This may be because these interlocutors were no longer new to the readings, had already attended collective readings during their early years in the *ashram* and did not feel the need any more to have the texts explained to them. Others formed their own little groups which might be just two friends reading a text together and discussing its meaning. Still others attended larger group reading sessions where the reader-audience discussed the import of these texts.

I attended one such group reading which one of my American interlocutors, Frank, invited me to. It was a study group in Auroville that met every Sunday morning for two hours to discuss *Savitri*, an epic poem written by Sri Aurobindo (1997d) which, “at 23, 813 lines, [...] is the longest work of poetry in the English language” (Pillai 2005, 240). Based on one of the many legends from the Mahabharata, it is a complex text, written in a Victorian style, which lends itself to many interpretations and analyses. Very simply explained, the legend revolves around the heroine, Savitri, who with her love and devotion persuades Yama, the god of death, to bring back her dead husband, Satyavan, to life. Sri Aurobindo inferred the legend to be outwardly a story of conjugal love, but inwardly as, “one of the many symbolic myths of the Vedic cycle” (Sri Aurobindo quoted in Heehs 2008, 299). In his rendition, *Savitri* is only secondarily a story of wifely devotion; it is first and foremost an allegory of his yoga. I mentioned before that Sri Aurobindo wrote in English. *Savitri*, however, serves as an interesting example of interpretive hermeneutics, since in the last stages of his life Sri Aurobindo lost his eyesight and appointed one of his trusted disciples, Nirodbaran, to act as his scribe for finishing the epic poem. Pillai (2005) argues that, “this adds another layer of complexity, as there are sometimes wordings that stand out to one well versed in Sri Aurobindo as perhaps the product of the inevitable changes that take place as a scribe commits an oral text to writing” (149). As we shall see below, the complexities and ambiguities arising from the processes of transcription are often in tension with the attempts to decipher the original intent of Sri Aurobindo through his writings.

The *Savitri* reading group which I attended was held in a building named Savitri Bhavan in Auroville. Frank had been attending the Savitri class for the past couple of years. It is usually led by an elderly American woman, who has been facilitating these discussion groups for many years. On this Sunday, though, it was Frank who led the session since the woman was unwell and unable to

attend. The discussion started with one of the group members reading out a stanza from the poem, followed by 10-15 minutes of meditation or “concentration”, and then a discussion around the lines read. Then another person read the succeeding stanza, followed by concentration, then discussion, and so the reading progressed. The ritualised reading format, not unlike that followed by Bible study groups in the West (with the exception of doing meditation), solidified the text as religious cannon, so that the text appeared to be the direct incantation of a sacred message. This does not mean that there was only one interpretation of the text. In fact, the readers were actively encouraged to participate in discussions and voice their opinions about the lines being read. One of the audience members, an American woman who has lived in Pondicherry for close to 40 years, said to me in a personal conversation later, “A book cannot contain the whole truth. You have to live it. Like you have the Bible fanatics and the Koran fanatics, we don’t want Savitri fanatics”. Many people I met in Pondicherry did share the American woman’s views and read *Savitri* as symbolic of Sri Aurobindo’s theory of spiritual evolution. However, during the reading session, the various interpretations and debates often led people to ask what Sri Aurobindo might have *really* meant. On this particular Sunday, these concerns led to a discussion of what the Vedic times might have been like.

We were discussing the canto entitled the *Growth of the Flame*, which refers to an idyllic space-time:

A shoreless sweep was lent to the mortal’s acts,
And art and beauty sprang from the human depths;
Nature and soul vied in nobility.
Ethics the human keyed to imitate heaven;
The harmony of a rich culture’s tones
Refined the sense and magnified its reach
To hear the unheard and glimpse the invisible
And taught the soul to soar beyond things known,
Inspiring life to greaten and break its bounds,
Aspiring to the Immortals’ unseen world (BOOK IV: *The Book of Birth and Quest* 360)

The imagery is of a beautiful, prosperous time and place where mortals – Savitri and her father, the king, Aswapati – used to live in harmony with nature, as well as with the gods. Frank explained that, in the canto, Savitri is referred to as the “flame” because she was also the daughter of the sun born to a human king. The flame here, he went on, could also mean the, “soul as the spark of the divine”. That spark has descended on the earth and like a flame it aspires to reach heavenward in its spiritual pursuits, Frank suggested. The allusion to a beautiful place with noble souls and rich culture led many people in the reading group to wonder if Sri Aurobindo was referring to Vedic

times in these lines. One of them asked Frank, “My question is, is this what India was at that time? Or is this an ideal of what India might have been, represented? Or is this Sri Aurobindo’s poetic description of the possibility of earth and man, nature and soul and all of that?” Others around her nodded in approval of the question. Frank replied:

I think all of those are true, what you’re saying. But I think [...] India was a great culture and here he is showing in a way the highest possibility and aims of cultures you know that are not just a result of the mind or something but that are also about developing the soul to reach to the divine. There is a spiritual impulse in being. And that may not be so true of all cultures but for Indian culture that was a predominant focus. And that stamp is there [...] I mean it is evident in the culture. But on the same hand, you know, if it wasn’t for Sri Aurobindo listing these significances, would we all recognise them? I don’t know.

No one could possibly know what the Vedic times were really like, something that was not lost on Frank and others in the group. The woman, who posed the question, wondered if this is what India was truly like in the Vedic times or if Sri Aurobindo was simply offering ideal representation of India’s supposed glorious past. Then again, she pointed to the possibility of these words as Sri Aurobindo’s metaphorical devices to explain more abstract and complex concepts like nature and soul. But, I felt, the possibilities of interpretive hermeneutics which the woman pointed to, got lost in the attempt to define India’s glorious ancient culture. Frank said, based on his reading of Sri Aurobindo’s texts, that India had and continues to have a “spiritual impulse” that may not be true of “other cultures”. The ancient Indian past was hypothetically brought closer and made knowable in an essentialist reading, capitulating to the ideology that India is spiritually superior to the West. However, not just India, other pre-modern cultures such as the American Indians and South Americans (“Mayans”, as someone mentioned) were also claimed to be repositories of superior spiritual wisdom by a few of the discussants¹⁹⁹. A perceived scholastically and historically unsupported unchanging ideal ancientness was, thus, considered to be authentic by some people present at the reading session, reinforcing the temporal distance between India and the West and reproducing monolithic conceptions of both the non-West and the West²⁰⁰.

As with Jed and Frank, so for most devotees, Sri Aurobindo both founded his teachings on the ancient wisdom contained in the Vedas and Upanishads, and added something remarkably beautiful

¹⁹⁹ This brings to mind Robert Bellah’s (1985) reference to Sheilism, that is, New Age spiritual practices, comprised of an eclectic mix of non-Western beliefs and practices.

²⁰⁰ Discussions on India’s “great culture”, however, were interrupted at one point when the conversation turned to art. Frank asked others if they believed that modern “Indian art” carried traces of the Divine. At this, an American woman in the audience responded that there is a spiritual emphasis in “Western art” as well. But the conversation digressed from that point and there was no more discussion around the spiritual emphasis in Indian or Western art.

to them by making them comprehensible in the present context. Most devotees would also maintain that Sri Aurobindo's authority derives from being part of the spiritual heritage of India, but that he went beyond the scriptures in propounding the idea of the spiritual transformation of the world through raised consciousness. So, even as the followers appreciate the contemporary innovation of the Vedas in Sri Aurobindo's writings, for some of them, this is at the same time a product of and in reference to an ancient spiritual heritage. It is precisely these creative tensions that underscore the modern seeking for pre or antimodernity. By extension, although there was a reification of the Indian past, it was simultaneously transformed through Sri Aurobindo's writings which, Frank said, "Bring out the past through the story of Savitri and then present it in a way for the future". Thus, because the eternal truth is seen to persist in his texts and in India as such, many of my interlocutors would argue, there is no need to go *back* to the Vedic times. Instead, many of them argue that building on that eternal knowledge, one has to build a new, transformed world, in keeping with the vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. While the ancient past continues to be significant in my interlocutors' narratives, the temporal reification of the past is, at the same time, mediated through ideas of the present and the future containing that past and yet aspiring to go beyond it. Their narratives are testament to the dialectic between temporal distance and proximity, and the reification of the past and the vision of the future. In the last section of this chapter, I will once again pick up the thread of future aspirations.

The disenchantments of home: the inner versus the outer divide

I was walking along the ocean one evening with an American *ashramite* who has been living in Pondicherry for some 40 odd years. Given the long time that he has been in Pondicherry, our conversation turned to the long term Westerners and their life in India, and how they approach India as home after having lived here for so long. The *ashramite* said that for those who have been living here for a long time, India is not so much the exotic other anymore as much as it is, nevertheless, the "not me". He succinctly captured what I had sensed from my interactions with many long term dwellers in Pondicherry, the tensions and contradictions which necessarily follow from the clash between the hyperreal and the everyday India. Despite their affective attachments with the guru, and the ideal of authenticity that Indian represented to them, many expatriates' integration in mundane life is far from complete.

Some, such as Amrita, are well aware that precisely because they have chosen to inhabit the strange and unfamiliar, they would never be able to immerse themselves completely in local life. Neither desirous of total integration nor condescending toward local customs, they have a realistic approach

to their life in India. Kenneth, for example, said that there were many things that irritated him in India, just as there were many things that irritated him in Canada, his country of birth and upbringing. He believed that it was not as if any one country was better or worse than the other. He also said that he would be able to feel at home anywhere in the world because everywhere there are human beings, after all, by which he meant that as long as he was in the company of fellow human beings, he would be able to find ways of engagement and cooperation. A few other expatriates actively participate in local life, for example, by teaching children from the villages surrounding Auroville, having Tamil friends, and celebrating local festivals and participating in Hindu rituals. But for some, even after years of living in Pondicherry, local life and the generic trope of Indian culture hold little attraction. For them, this is due to the inability of the locals to exemplify their inner authentic spirit. I contend here that the abstract notion of spirituality is located in the temporally distant authentic India and not in the proximate life and culture of Pondicherry. This enables the extraction of Indian spirituality along the lines of an inner (spiritual) and outer (cultural) dualism which can translate to issues of who is more “conscious”, leading to spiritual elitism, which I explore below.

The low cost of living in India coupled with the traditional emphasis on austerity in *ashrams* has enabled many people from the West to live what they perceive to be spiritual lives in India. Traditionally, *ashrams* were meant to be located in forests where the hermit or renouncer could practice religious austerity far from the distractions of the life of a householder (Olivelle 1993). As Patrick Olivelle (1993) points out, “It appears that in ancient India there were several socio-religious institutions that were associated with withdrawal from human culture and with living in the wilderness or the woods” (112). However, modern Indian *ashrams* such as Sri Aurobindo *ashram* are not meant to be for people who renounce the world, rather spiritual practitioners are meant to work on the world by being in the midst of it. Sri Aurobindo stated, “This *ashram* has been created [...] not for the renunciation of the world but as a centre and a field of practice for the evolution of another kind and form of life which would in the final end be moved by a higher spiritual consciousness and embody a greater life of the spirit” (cited in Klaudt 1997, 27). Insofar as the purported aim of any *ashram* is to remove oneself from the mundane concerns of life to focus on inner transformation, a stance of not renouncing the world poses a challenge – how to remain in this world without being bogged down by everyday concerns?

In the case of Sri Aurobindo *ashram*, the answer is to create a world within the world. An Indian interlocutor who had grown up in Pondicherry, attending the *ashram* school and college before becoming an *ashramite*, told me that *ashramites*’ basic needs of food, accommodation, and clothing

are met by the *ashram* because the Mother wanted that *sadhaks* (spiritual practitioners) be able to concentrate on their spiritual practice without worrying about the most essential everyday requirements. *Ashramites* are allotted residential one-room units and all their meals are provided by the *ashram*'s common dining hall. As mentioned in the Introduction, *ashramites* are meant to work in one or more of the *ashram*'s various departments and centres in keeping with the philosophy of *karma* yoga. Besides their work in the departments and/or centres, collective meditations are held in the *ashram* playground and at the *samadhi* every week, but attending them is left to one's discretion. Many of my interlocutors have a very busy schedule from morning to evening, which for most people consists of visiting the *samadhi*, working in their departments, and taking their meals in the dining hall.

While *ashramites*, in their individual capacity, can and do interact with whoever they want to, nonetheless, the organisational structure of the *ashram* is such that they do not need to necessarily interact with many people both inside and outside the *ashram*. One can simply cycle or walk to the *samadhi* from one's *ashram* accommodation, go to the dining hall for meals, then go to their respective department for work (most of these buildings within the quieter French town in the city), without meeting or interacting with many people over the course of the day. Many *ashramites* would often quip to me, "you know more people in the *ashram* than I do", and this from those who have been in the *ashram* for decades. The *ashram*, while conferring a high degree of independence to the *ashramites* in taking care of their needs and therefore affording them the opportunity to focus on their spiritual practice, also enables a relatively insular existence in the middle of the city. Thus, the *ashram*-space is not the everyday space of the local Indians. The *ashram*, then, is *in* Pondicherry but hardly *of* it insofar as the interaction with locals and even amongst themselves at the structural or organisational level is rather limited.

It is this characteristic of deliberate insularity of the *ashram* space that enables many of my interlocutors to be at home in India without necessarily confronting the everyday life of India. One of my interlocutors, Anna, a Hungarian devotee of Mother and Sri Aurobindo, living in Italy for the past 20 years, was visiting the *ashram* at the time I met her (she is not an *ashramite*). She cited the aloofness of *ashrams* from the "outside world" as one of the reasons for coming to India:

Everybody has, all the human being has this [spiritual] teachings in their inner and this is the first basic motivation why people came in India because in India still can be felt, can be lived in some kind of way [...] of course these days, is not even easy because we Westerner people we had an image about India, how it is and how should be [might have been] years ago and now we are coming here and what we saw is just this Americanisation [I laugh] throughout the world, so you have to really find out the way because of course still there are

ashrams, still there are spiritual communities, so maybe was one of the reasons I choose to come here because here the spiritual community is very strong, is very well limited from the outsider world.

Although retreat from the everyday world is a necessary characteristic of the institution of *ashrams* for the purposes of intense spiritual practice, the attempt to be situated in the everyday world while still being divorced from it produces irresolvable tensions, with one result being the virtual unmooring of *ashrams* from their immediate context. Anna's reference to the spiritual community as, "very well limited from the outsider world", points to its inclusion in the abstract ideal of a spiritual landscape. It is from within these retreat-spaces that some of my interlocutors maintain a "simple" lifestyle which they could not have pursued in their own countries. It is also from within these spaces that the everyday life of local people can be disregarded as simply outer manifestations.

For some of my interlocutors, India's everyday life has nothing to be desired outside of its spiritual core. Eva distinguished between inner and outer truth. Referring to the littered streets, she said, in India people have the, "inner truth but the outer they have completely ignored". Such reified presumptions about people's inner and outer truth keep alive colonialist and Orientalist imaginaries of India as uncivilized in its outer, that is, day to day affairs, and simultaneously highly advanced in its inner dimension. Eva further mentioned that if not for spirituality, they (the Westerners) would not come to India because the outer life has nothing to offer them. And yet, as I noted in the previous chapter, Eva believed that she has a past life connection with India as do many other Westerners which is why, she said, "we come *back* here (India)" (emphasis mine). As Peter Moran (2004) argues in the case of European and American Buddhists in Nepal, "notions of *karma* and rebirth allow nearly any European or American to appropriate the essence of the other" (116), while dismissing all that they hold to be irrelevant to their purposes. The claim of returning on the soul level in this case argues that they are the true inheritors of India's spirituality, unlike other Indians whose inner being and outer habits are perceived to be out of tune. The claim of spiritual elitism in the context of ethnic alterity works at two levels, an elite position to both Indians and Westerners who are seen to live an inauthentic life.

In one of our conversations, Yvonne said that she never missed Germany after settling in Pondicherry because, "I was never fond of Germany. It was not my home", but she also went on to say that she would not have come to India if not for spirituality (in another conversation she said that she came to India specifically for Sri Aurobindo and Mother) because:

The life [in Pondicherry and India in general] is so different. And I am suffering from this overpopulated country which is so undisciplined. I suffer. Everywhere the people are so pushy [...] why this rush. I don't know [...] Yeah, no, I mean I am not attracted to *bhindi* [okra] and Indian cooking. I would never want to do all this if you mean that. And we cannot think of India other than a spiritual country, so ingrained in every breath here, from morning, in the food, in the mudras, everything has a deeper meaning.

While I too find myself getting annoyed with the pushing and jostling that goes on in busy public places in Indian cities, I was struck by the many strands of Yvonne's narrative which takes recourse to colonialist discourses of the everyday life of India as symptomatic of an unsophisticated world which the West seems to have left behind. In the same breath, the narrative exalts and extracts an abstract spirituality divorced from the everyday world. The imaginary of spiritual India is clearly positioned against the everyday life and experience of locals. As she makes it known, she is not here to participate in India's culture. What is more, Yvonne says, what she is here for – spirituality – does not reside in the everyday customs but somewhere else. Where exactly? In the elusive “deeper meaning” but there is a contradiction here: this deeper meaning, nevertheless, is ingrained in the cultural forms of the food (but she is not interested in how to cook this food), the mudras, *everything*.

Yet, how can there be a separation if everything is imbued with this deeper meaning, as Yvonne said? The paradox is explained by some of my interlocutors in terms of a lack of consciousness or awareness among the Indian people of their own culture's deeper meaning. There is a chasm, they feel, between the deeper, inner realm of Indian society and its people, and the outer, external cultural forms. Yvonne said as much, “the Indian people themselves are not aware of it. But some people (meaning Sri Aurobindo and the Mother) have published about it so I know”. The Orientalist creation of an ancient Vedic Hinduism places it at a far remove from local life even as it enables a textual appropriation of its essence, going back historically to Max Mueller's multi-volume *The Sacred Books of the East*²⁰¹. In these constructs, “The ‘natural light’ of Hinduism was thought to have been eclipsed by folk superstition and ritualism, which lacked the characteristics of ancient, pristine, philosophical book Hinduism” (Jouhki 2006, 79). In the present context too, neo-Orientalist textual reading of modern Hinduism removes the spiritual from the cultural²⁰². Even when the former is seen as always entwined with the latter as in Yvonne's statement that everything in India is imbued with spirituality, yet the paradoxical claim is that the deep inner spirituality remains hidden or incompletely realised through cultural practices because of people's purported

²⁰¹ See Chapter 1 for a discussion of the textual approach to Hinduism

²⁰² Texts are particularly important in the physical absence of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother since it is one of the primary ways in which their charismatic authority is still maintained in the *ashram* community.

lack of awareness of inner truth²⁰³. Such assertions lead to an unfortunate spiritual chauvinism where only some people can claim access and rightful allegiance to spirituality based on, like I said before, the separation of the authentic spiritual from the cultural, and the homogenisation of Indians into one blanket category. Some of the Westerners, then, claim to be more authentic than the Indians they reside amongst. My own critique of such attitudes is best articulated in Sally's words who once said, "I don't much care for the word 'spiritual'. I mean the word is okay but the adjective is dangerous. How can you decide who is spiritual and who is not?"

As mentioned previously in Chapter 4, with a few exceptions, my interlocutors rejected the local customs of temple worship and deification as nothing more than mechanical actions, even though followers of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have their own personal rituals of visiting the *samadhi* regularly, bowing and kneeling at the tomb, and meditating. While some deemed their own actions as being done in the spirit of yoga and surrender, Tamils' or other Indian visitors' reverence was quite often dismissed *en bloc* as simply habit without consciousness. Noting a similar trend among European Aurovillians, Jukka Jouki (2006) writes:

Aurovillians seem to have no trouble in believing in the Divine, believing in one eternal religion, feeling the Divine in their body cells, doing *pujas* for the Mother, visiting the Aurovillian Temple of the Divine Mother, uniting with God, revering *Kali* and *Krishna*, believing in reincarnation, opening heart chakras, using Hindu terminology, viewing Auroville as predestined and believing in inevitable Divine evolution, not to mention the Mother and Sri Aurobindo defeating Hitler and how Sri Aurobindo's spirit moved into the Mother's body. The prohibition of religion in Auroville seemed to mean a monopoly of Aurovillian *neoreligion* (203).

Certain religious practices and concepts, which Jouhki (ibid) refers to above, when adapted and incorporated by Western spiritual practitioners are considered by them as perfectly matching their inner state. Still, they reject religious practices and beliefs of local Indians as mindless and blindly ritualistic. The fact that many of their own practices are ritualistic and that their vocabulary is replete with religious references seemed to escape some of my European interlocutors. Instead, their practices and beliefs emerge to claim more authenticity since these are seen to be exemplars of an inward oriented spirituality, found and perfected in the elsewhere which is both timeless and acultural. The creation of an authentic identity, thus, for some rests on a simplistic dualism between

²⁰³ Such views are clearly in contrast with the views of Jerry (see Chapter 3) who believes that Indians are fundamentally humane. I find it problematic to accept both unreserved romanticism and unqualified condescension based on cultural homogenisation.

self and Other, and inner truth and outer culture, glossing over the processes of adaptation and enculturation involved in such identity formations²⁰⁴.

A Canadian follower expressed his dissatisfaction with the locals' temple worship, "a lot of people who come to the temples are mostly just superstitious. They don't understand much about the esoteric, the sort of spiritual truths in Indian religion. A lot of them are looking for [...] they want their wife to have a baby, they want their son to go to college, so it's really like a spiritual ATM where you punch the right buttons and you get what you want. So, it's not very spiritualist". The imposition of an essentialising spirituality versus materialism dichotomy, "flattens any diversity of viewpoint among Tamil people (and Indians in general) and relegates all their spiritual impulses to the anachronistic realm of satisfying simplistic desires" (Pillai 2005, 311, parenthesis mine). It also separates the spiritual from the cultural, hence, allowing the former to be seen as something different to the everyday practices of temple worship. Besides, surely the same logic of inscrutability and inexplicability that some of my interlocutors claimed for their spiritual practices apply to the practices of locals too, whereby the inner meaning of their rituals may very well be obscure to an outside observer.

Further, as Pillai (2005) argues, a critique of the locals' seemingly materialistic desires takes no cognisance of the privileged socio-economic position of many Western long term dwellers when compared to the locals. As discussed in the Introduction to the thesis, some of my interlocutors receive pension from Western countries, and even where the money received is not a huge sum, when converted to Indian rupees, it does allow for a comfortable life. For others, that is, those situated in the Third World, the material order of things may not allow the privilege to ask for, "a soul full of light", in the words of an interlocutor, instead of a university degree and a job to live by in this mundane world.

Indian materialism, Western spirituality

When many of my interlocutors first went to Pondicherry, it bore hardly any resemblance to the Pondicherry of today. As one of them said jocularly about the city as it was 30 years ago, there were so few vehicles then that you could meditate while cycling through the city. "Try that now!", she said. Certainly, given that many of my interlocutors have lived in Pondicherry for several decades, it is inevitable that they reflect on the changes that have taken place there or in

²⁰⁴ See previous chapter.

India in general. Their reflections, in turn, point to their expectations of India, their own motivations for coming to India, and their continuing lives there.

Before examining the different narratives, a quick look at the transformation of the Indian economy will clarify the context against which narratives of “how India has changed” can be placed. Post-independence, from 1947 till 1991, the government maintained a tightly regulated, state-centric economy. Between 1947 and 1956, the Indian government emphasised strict monitoring of foreign investment such that economic controls rested in the main with the national government (Mathur 2010, 216). The economy of this time can be characterised as socialistic and state-centric with primary focus on self-reliance and protection. However, from the 1970s onwards, significant changes occurred in the Indian political economy. “Salary hikes enabled by Indira Gandhi’s 1973 Pay Commission, the long term effects of the green revolution, remittances from Indian migrant labourers in the Gulf, and, more broadly, the complex of reforms collectively known as liberalization” shifted the referents of the middle class from “a civil service-oriented salariat, short on money but long on institutional perks” to a more consumerist, affluent rank of people no longer satisfied with self-sufficiency and socialism (Mazzarella n.d., 1-2). A state-centric economic model came to be seen by policy makers as being too parochial and as inimical to the nation’s development, making it unsuited for competition in the increasingly globalised market economy.

Subsequently, the New Industrial Policy of 1991 opened up a closed, socialist style economy to the forces of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation, attracting huge amounts of foreign direct investment, and consequently inflows of foreign consumer goods²⁰⁵. A new, relatively relaxed bureaucratic atmosphere began to allow multinational corporations (MNCs) and several international brands to operate in India. Post-1991, the “liberalization process gave birth to new patterns of consumption that all segments of the middle class valued equally. New western consumer goods made their appearance on the Indian markets and the middle class, the first target of the importers, developed more Americanized tastes and habits” (Jaffrelot and van der Veer 2008, 18). The sudden, dramatic pace at which the Indian economy opened itself to the world market led to the emergence and growth of the new middle classes, aspiring to participate in a globally oriented, “culture of consumption” (Fernandes 2006, xv). Although the middle class remains a tiny segment of the total Indian population, it is certainly the most visible, and it is this

²⁰⁵ This coincides with the fall of the Soviet bloc. Neoliberal economic policies were bolstered worldwide by the failure of socialism to provide an alternative to capitalism.

India of the middle class consumption ethos that evoked several refrains from my interlocutors regarding present day life in India.

There were different views among my interlocutors on the changing material conditions and the visible growth of consumption among the middle classes and the aspiring (whether or not in the middle classes). For some, consumption in India is a part of global consumptive practices which, as a whole, they argued, is unsustainable and unjust, giving the wealthy the greatest access to new commodities. As Luigi and Elena both said, consumptive practices are not just characteristic of India, it is a phenomenon found everywhere. But as Luigi also pointed out, in the Indian context, aspiring to better material conditions was also a part of trying to overcome the structural injustices of, “caste and creed”. In Hindu society, traditionally, certain castes were meant to perform certain occupations and it was often religious injunctions that were used to legitimise such a social order. People from so-called lower castes were, thus, compelled to remain in menial jobs with generation after generation forced to perform the same work. In some ways consumption has become a leveller in overcoming caste barriers (Jha 2014). As market research consultant Rama Bijapurkar states, it is “impossible to tell a person’s caste from a person’s brand buying behaviour or his or her home” (Reddy 2016)²⁰⁶.

Some others too saw these as, if not particularly desirable, then nevertheless legitimate goals on the part of the people and the nation as such – “and why not?”, as one of them said. Sally, for one, could not have agreed more. Talking about a young Tamil couple from one of the villages around Auroville, who ran a café in Pondicherry, she said, “they are village kids [...] and so polite and charming and fresh...it’s amazing. A lot of them have succeeded academically and got good jobs [...] wonderful”. Often as well, their ruminations were more prosaic, reflecting on the range of commodities that are now easily available in Pondicherry compared to a few decades ago when they had first arrived in the city. Shannon recalled in amusement that when she first came to Pondicherry, more than 30years ago, you could not buy shampoo, toilet paper, or tampons. Another American interlocutor remembered coming back to India with tons of razor blades every time he visited his family in the United States. All of those things are now easily available in Pondicherry. Whether for matters of personal convenience or a more general take on “development” as such, opinions on Indian materialism ranged from being outright critical through positive to more ambivalent and nuanced.

²⁰⁶ <http://savageminds.org/2016/03/12/waiting-for-the-future/#more-19335>

But sometimes a much needed critique of unsustainable and unjust development got conflated with a critique of the so-called blind mimicry of the West, framed as a loss of essence. Some of my interlocutors were deeply troubled by the changing economic conditions of India, for increasing consumerism signalled, to them, the deeper malaise of materialism which they hold to be inherently corrupting and contradictory to a spiritual life. While more and more people in the West, they said, were turning to spirituality in frustrated response to their materialistic lives, Indians on the other hand, it seemed were turning Westward. Associated with their views was the purported issue of mimicry: that India is copying the West and, even worse, copying the worst of the West. Eva, in keeping with her self-constructed distinction between the inner and the outer realms lamented that people in India have completely ignored the outer. She went on in a bewildered tone, “I can’t imagine why India only copies the worst from the West – materialism, consumerism, smoking, drinking, sex and of course money. Why can’t they imitate the beauty, for instance?” By “beauty”, one of the things Eva was referring to was public parks. She complained that people “here” build parks but after a while it is all run down and no one takes care of it anymore.

The idea of imitation follows from the spatial and temporal separation of the East from the West. Non-Western modernity is not seen as an alternative modernity, it is simply seen as modernity *lagging behind*. Hence, any movement in the teleological schema of non-modern/modern becomes a movement from the past of the West into the present of the West. The Eurocentric model of the linear transfer of Western values to the non-West, without any conception of the historical dialogues that have shaped these values in the first place and the ways in which they continue to be shaped in the present, completely ignores the complexity of modernity. “The model is reduced to presenting a phenomenon which is solely European and with a linear timescale from traditional to modern. Synchronic comparisons are organized diachronically, producing a scale of progress. Hence ‘progress’ is defined as a phenomenon in which some people’s present is other people’s future” (Jouhki 2006, 64). But the interesting point is that in my interlocutors’ narratives, the West’s present, in some of its aspects, is *not* seen as progress. It is seen as something that corrupts and distracts from the progress of the soul. A spiritual life is opposed to the aspects of smoking, drinking, sex, and money, which are generically included in the free-floating signifier of materialism²⁰⁷.

²⁰⁷ See Chapter 1 for the spiritual versus material dichotomy.

Of course, such presumptions forget that smoking, drinking, sex and the pursuit of money are hardly historically derivative from the West. The *nawabs*, maharajas and other aristocrats in India, for instance, lived opulent lives with harems and free flow of alcohol. In fact, the British crown cited “Oriental despotism” as a way to justify colonialism, in terms of Britain’s “civilising mission”, in India (Tzoref-Ashkenazi 2013). The luxurious habits were declared decadent and inferior to British customs, and British *nabobs*, that is, white men who mimicked the luxurious lifestyle of Mughal nawabs, were particularly castigated by officials of the Empire (Nechtman 2006). In the nationalist discourse, however, Europeans were seen as people with “loose” morals and Indian women were warned against becoming like their European counterparts (Chatterjee 1993), a view that is not uncommon in popular discourse in contemporary India.

Funnily enough, an American interlocutor of mine, over dinner one night, expressed her surprise at having recently found out from an Indian male friend that a common perception of Western women in India is that they are sexually “available”. “Why would they think that?!” she exclaimed. Her reaction breaks through the surface of constant homogenisation of India and the West by both Indians and Westerners, pointing to the fact that these are lenses through which complex cultural particularities and their historical development are smoothed over in terms of simplistic reifications. These narratives seem to echo what sociologist Dipankar Gupta calls “Westoxication” to describe the Indian middle classes and elites whom he views as absorbed in, “a superficial consumerist display of commodities and fads produced in the West” (cited in Brosius 2010, 10). Christiane Brosius (ibid) argues that Gupta, “stereotypes (Westoxication) as a source of loneliness, competitiveness and seething dissatisfaction”, just like many of my interlocutors. The essentialised readings of both India and the West, as manifest in laments about India’s imitation of the West, oversimplify what is a complex process of modernisation in India, where in any case, “the focus of comparison” with the First World, “is increasingly being replaced by reference to other developments in Asian countries of the ‘Global South’: Singapore, Malaysia, and China” (Brosius 2010, 9). The issue of mimicking the West is, thus, one that needs to be explored further.

Going back to Eva’s narrative, other aspects of Western life such as public parks, cleanliness, and disciplined public behaviour are seen as markers of progress. For Eva, imitation in itself is not a problem; it is what one copies from the West that matters. While the spiritual inner core of India appeals to many of my interlocutors, they are simultaneously at pains to reconcile its everyday with neo-colonial presumptions of what the outer must look like to produce the perfect inner-outer match. In a similar fashion to Walter Benjamin’s (1986) theorisation on mechanical

reproductions of art works leading to a loss or diminution of the original object's aura, India's cheap imitation of the West, as Eva claimed, merely ends up producing a shoddy copy of it without the substance, the cultural sophistication of the West. The Orientalist dualism not only reproduces the spatial and temporal differences between India and the West, but also obfuscates the power relations inherent in castigating Indians as mimics while excusing oneself from, what can be called, spiritual mimicry of India. Instead, the latter is often couched within a vocabulary of quest, inner call and *karmic* connection, as discussed before.

In *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993), Michael Taussig shows how the asymmetrical power relations between the colonisers and the colonised (such as the South American Cuna in his book) are destabilised by the mimetic interactions between the “civilised” Europeans and the “primitive” indigenes. Examining Charles Darwin's diary entries on the meeting between the people of Terra del Fuego and European “explorers” on board the *Beagle* in 1832, Taussig finds that the Fuegians are described by Darwin as excellent mime artists. Darwin records that the “savages” are perfectly accurate in miming the gestures, words and actions of the Europeans. But in the same entry, Darwin writes of the European sailors mimicking the Fuegians, or mimicking what they thought the Fuegians were mimicking. “Who is mimicking whom?”, Taussig asks (1993, 77). Yet, the burden of mimesis lies on the “savage”, for the Europeans have no *need* to mimic (theirs is the purported burden of civilisation), hence, their blindness in spotting their own antics as mimicry. The positive power of mimesis - “the art of becoming something else, of becoming Other” (Taussig 1993, 36) - which Taussig tries to resuscitate in his book, constantly compels us to ask: who is seen to be the mimic? While certainly, the mimetic interaction between the Fuegians and the Europeans is complex and a challenge to the power relations inherent in those interactions, nevertheless, the Europeans' optical illusion of the natives as the only true mimics leaves those power relations unchallenged in the larger scheme of things.

Extending this argument to the subject matter of this thesis, it is clear that some Western expatriates consider Indians to be copying the West, but they, in turning Eastward, do not see themselves as copying India, for the scales of power are tipped in their favour. It is a result of such power imbalances that spiritual adepts from the West perceive themselves as genuinely seeking while lamenting that Indians are losing their culture and mimicking the West²⁰⁸, pointing to the claims of spiritual elitism.

²⁰⁸ This echoes the central issue of loss of authenticity in white, Western societies, discussed before in Chapter 2 (the response to this perceived lack within the context of the 1960s), Chapter 3 (gurus as

The mimetic similarities born of India's cheap imitation are *unheimlich*, that is, uncanny or unhomely (Freud 2003), not simply because they resemble the *unheimlich* of the home left behind (the ills of materialism as it were), but because mimicry challenges the solidity of cultural differences and their reification, the stuff of essence. "The menace of mimicry", as Homi Bhabha (1994) argues is that it, "articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority" (88). The native subject born of colonial production is neither here, nor there – Anglicised in appearance but not English in spirit – "almost the same but not quite/not white" (Bhabha 1994, 92). Modern and contemporary Indians, it seems, are hell bent on further complicating their neither-here-nor-there (not quite) location, threatening some of my interlocutors' imaginaries of India and Indians (not to mention Indian-ness) through the looking-glass of easily definable categories. Clearly, the transforming context of a globalised capitalist economy unsettles the essentialising either/or logic of Indian/Western, and the use of Indianness as Other to the Western self. Within this context, the monolithic figure of the Indian becomes a charged symbol of authenticity against which both the modern Indian(s) and the Western seeker gets defined.

Referring to modern Indian people, Yvonne complained:

Yvonne: Modern people [in India] are just copying the West and they look...

Me: What do you mean when you say that they are copying the West? In clothes?

Yvonne: In everything. In food, in clothes, in jobs, in getting the worst. I mean in their married life, they don't know anything anymore about the foundation. I couldn't believe it but like there was one young mother in Park GH and then she started talking about how they are rediscovering spirituality [...] trying to observe and understand this by a TV! By a TV shows or some courses in neighbourhood and when we came here yoga was called [...] *asanas* were called *asanas* [physical exercise postures] and yoga was yoga. Now everybody goes to yoga class. It's all copying the West. I don't know to what extent because I don't have so much westernised Indian friends. But I [...] it breaks my heart.

Me: But is it all bad?

Yvonne: yes, it is very bad [in a decisive tone] The food is bad, the health is bad, the sex is bad, the superficial life is bad, the materialistic life is bad, what is good? The figures don't look good, you don't know who you are. Sri Aurobindo clearly said you shouldn't become brown monkeys copying the West. So why do you want to do that? What is the goal of your life, just to have money and then?

symbolising spiritual authenticity of India), and Chapter 4 (re-creating the self as connected to the divine to overcome the sense of the self as fragmented and, thus, inauthentic).

Yvonne went on to say that she had exaggerated in criticising the West and certainly not all was bad. But what she meant was that despite the fact that people's lifestyle in the West might entail more comforts, such a comfortable lifestyle came at the:

Cost of the earth. It's on cost of your children, of the future generations, exploitation everywhere. Where is the mindset different? Only when that is changed and it has to be changed in the whole world collectively now. We can't say the Westerners have to do it and the Asians don't have to do it. And also the role of the women. Why do the *shakti*²⁰⁹ want to be like Western women, I don't know why. They don't know, they forget what they are. They forget their power. They lose their foundation. They are not aware. I don't know how much *you* are aware [with a small laugh]. I have no idea.

Yvonne's narrative, like that of Eva's, was based partly on her own experience and partly on rhetoric – the rhetoric of India's imitation of the West – whereby separating the two, beyond a point, becomes quite impossible. As Yvonne herself admitted, she does not know many “Westernised” Indians, by which presumably she meant Indians who want to earn more money, enjoy material comforts and, specifically Indian women who dress like Westerners. Yet, she was swift and decisive in her condemnation of such “copying”, for in doing that they (the Indians) are forgetting their own foundations, she said. In other words, there is a loss of *essence*, “they forget what they are”. A criticism that was extended to me as well. She suggested that by becoming more modern I am losing the spiritual power that is inherent in the good native woman by the teleological virtue of not being modern/western. Certain attributes such as fluency in English, my lack of hesitation in talking to strangers, my solo travel to Pondicherry, and the fact that I now lived in New Zealand, considered by many of my expatriate interlocutors to be markers of modernity and Westernisation, made them more accessible to me and easier for them to identify with me. But the same markers also, at times, made me inauthentic in their eyes, even as their relocation to India suggested the recovery of their lost foundations by *returning* home to India at the inner level and by extension returning to a pre-modern pre-Christian lost universal foundation. The figure of the native, thus, gets frozen in time devolved of agency even as the Western spiritual seeker gets remoulded in the frame of an authentic insider in the spiritual home²¹⁰.

Since Indians are busy copying the West, I asked Yvonne, are the Westerners coming to India to get “Indianised”? Yvonne pondered over this and started replying but after a while stopped to

²⁰⁹ Referring to women as goddesses as in Shakti, the consort of Shiva

²¹⁰ See Introduction for the section on doing fieldwork at home among Westerners.

ask me, “Indianised in which way, what do you mean by that?” I said, “I am not sure but if Indians are getting more Westernised, is there any parallel?” Yvonne’s replied:

I don’t know, when I, many, many years back, there was a woman [a Westerner, I presume] who married an Indian, then she was wearing *bindi* [customarily the red dot on a married woman’s forehead] and *sari* because she was in that society, she was appreciated to do that. But now I don’t know whether she [...] If you look at foreigners, then we are here to be spiritualised if that is the Indian way, not interested to wear *saris* and *bindi* and all that. So I think the people [...] are not really interested in becoming Indian, we are just busy following the spiritual path unless you get married and you want to be in the society. But that is not with us [in the *ashram* because *ashramites* are not supposed to get married], in Auroville it is an enormous mixture. And now everyone is prepared for the new world and there is mixtures of everything [...] It need not be anything typical anymore [...] take the best from everywhere, no. [...] and I see that a large chunk of westerners, they stay in Golconde [one of the *ashram* guest houses] and work in the archives. They are mostly in Western surrounding, nothing much of Indian life [...] The work is western, mind work and they are just what they are, no intention of becoming Indian [...] But they will wear *salwar kameez* [a long tunic with loose trousers] because it’s convenient [...] I also wear it if I have to represent [the *ashram*] but if I am free then I wear like that [what she is wearing today, a loose blouse and a pair of stretchy leggings] [...] See, when we see this superstition, these old beliefs, family attachment, you think we want to become that? We see it but we are not like that, or we are like that but we have to change superstition and get rid of attachment, so we don’t want to copy that.

While Yvonne castigated the Indians for forgetting who they are, she made no bones about her own disinclination to become more like them, pointing to her location in a self-created liminal zone which is in India and yet not in it because of the selective extraction of an essence from India’s everyday life. Some women, like the woman she knew many years back who had married into an Indian family, might adopt certain customs in manners of dressing and such like, but she herself had no time for such things. The only reason why she is in Pondicherry, Yvonne said, is to be on the spiritual path. That is, the spirituality of India (its inner truth, if you will) is universalised to enable its appropriation, but the cultural forms – “superstitions”, “old beliefs” and “family attachment” - hold no attraction for her *personally* (another day, referring to the previous day’s conversation from which I have quoted above, she reiterated that she is not in India to be Indian, “we are here for Mother’s touch”). The malady of the disconnect between the inner and the outer which is seen to afflict Indians *en masse* plays out in a different way in the case of the remoulded Western spiritual practitioner. While they recover their true inner core, the outer for them is neither Western nor Indian. Rather, it is perceived as a creative mix of a post-Western post-Indian outer which is a true reflection of, what can be called, the New Age global soul. The purposeful creative dialectic of inner and outer changes in the case of the spiritual

adept is clearly claimed as superior to the dialectic of the inner and the outer in modern Indians reduced to chaos and ignorance.

Future aspirations

In the first two sections of this chapter, I talked about the creation of India as temporally distant from the West. Nostalgia for the lost spiritual foundations and its recovery in India through the apperceived ancient traditions including the Vedic past underwrite this temporal distantiation. In the next two sections, I showed how the temporal distantiation creates a chasm between abstract spirituality and everyday life. However, it is not as if my interlocutors are solely concerned with the past. Their longing for the lost spiritual past in the West, “*sanatana dharma*” or the universal path in Sally’s words, was somewhat attenuated by “returning” to India (“returning” because many of my interlocutors interpreted their turning toward India as an inevitability prescribed by “past life connection” with India or their gurus). But their narratives are also future oriented, connecting their nostalgia for the authentic past with hopes and assertions of building a meaningful future where the self can be realised to its fullest extent. As Boym (2001) writes, “nostalgia [...] is not always retrospective; it can be prospective as well. The fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future” (8). Or, we could say, fantasies of the past combined with hopes for the future lend themselves to certain interpretations of the present. For many of my interlocutors, concerns about where India might be heading in terms of overdevelopment, and exoticist and ethnocentric views about Indians copying the West, were also often juxtaposed with future imaginings in terms of progress – spiritual progress of this world.

This was particularly true of those of my interlocutors who followed the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, which are futuristic. In their texts, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother speak of bringing divine consciousness to the material, physical world, such that all beings get endowed with a higher consciousness. As explained in Chapter 1, Integral Yoga envisages the human being as a transitory creature on the path of spiritual evolution. Even though the progress of mankind and the world is inevitable, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother state that every practitioner of Integral Yoga must aspire to “higher consciousness” and be a part of the transformation of the world into a spiritually evolved one. Sri Aurobindo (2011) writes that while, “[t]he former steps in evolution were taken by Nature without a conscious will in the plant and animal life, in man Nature becomes able to evolve by a conscious will in the instrument”

(122)²¹¹. The goal of Integral Yoga, as Sri Aurobindo explains it, is not to renounce the world to seek individual liberation (*moksha*) but rather to divinise it. He writes, “What is envisaged is a change from a lesser to a greater, from a lower to a higher, from a surface to a deeper consciousness – indeed to the largest, highest, deepest possible and a total change and revolution of the whole being in its stuff and mass and every detail into that yet unrealised diviner nature of existence” (1997e, 371).

In keeping with the utopian futurism of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother’s philosophy, the present disintegrated, anxiety-provoking state of the world is understood by many of my interlocutors as simply a phase in the long process of divinising this world, of opening, “the here to somewhere else” (Povinelli 2016)²¹². I was talking to Jerry about India’s IT boom and if, like some of the other people I had spoken to, the consumerist aspirations of the Indian middle classes bothered him. He said:

Nooo, it is something that has to be gone through [...] And people think that all the young people are going to the dogs, completely selfish. And I can only smile. I don’t think that anyone’s going to the dogs. I think it all has to be gone through. There is a phase, you must remember, which Mother calls the vital. The whole emotional life, ability to be a great creator. This has been suppressed by India’s recent past. So now these things have to be fully experienced. So it’s only natural that people are going for more material success and, and vital power. But I think it’s just something that has to be gone through [...] People think “oh they’ll be gobbled up by America or overwhelmed by China.” I don’t think Indians are going to be gobbled up by anybody. From what I’ve seen, somehow they know how to wriggle out and maintain their individuality.

The narrative trope of India maintaining its inherent essence in the face of outside threat was common in both Orientalist and Indian Nationalist discourses. In these discourses, as in Jerry’s narrative, India has, for centuries, assimilated invaders into its folds without losing its true spirit. Again, a narrative trope which is disturbingly common in contemporary Hindu nationalist discourse, relying on a singular notion of Hindu identity in opposition to the singular notion of other identities, in particular Muslim identity (van der Veer 1994). Cultural reifications by many of my interlocutors can have the unfortunate result of feeding into such discourses. For Jerry, people in India still have that essential inner quality but in their outer life, he believes, that they are changing. Still, he regards the Indian present of technological development and consumerism as only inevitable in the great scheme of things. In a rather teleological schema, as another interlocutor said to me, India is today where the United States was 50 years back. And hence, she

²¹¹ http://sri-aurobindo.in/workings/sa/26/26_eng.pdf

²¹² <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/792-petroleum>

said, while those in the United States are fed up with their materially comfortable lives, people in India need this stage to go through before they arrive at the point of disillusionment with materialism. Of course, the privileged middle classes in India, who best exemplify the country's consumerist impulse, follow different trajectories which do not necessarily align with such teleology. During my fieldwork, as I mentioned in Chapter 2, I met a young woman from Delhi who had given up her well-paying job to become an *ashramite*. But I also met another young woman from Bangalore, working in an IT firm, who was a follower of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar²¹³ and believed that spirituality could be made a part of one's life even as one followed the routine of earning money and having a job.

Modern Indian gurus have adapted their teachings to suit the needs of modern, middle class Indians, many of whom do not wish to escape from their materialistic lives. Instead, they want to lead a materialistic life spiritually. The complexities of everyday life in India are, thus, difficult to contain within a linear model of social to spiritual progression. Nevertheless, Jerry believed that the full spiritual potential embodied by India can only be realised once the more "vital" desires and needs of the people are met. It is, for him, a stage in the spiritual evolution of the world. In this arrangement, everyone and every place has a role to fulfil in order to finally herald the changed world.

The narrative of the world's spiritual transformation is something that I often heard from Yvonne. I remember in December 2015, the attack on the Paris headquarters of the French satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*, was making headlines, and was often the topic of conversation for me and my interlocutors. Yvonne rued the innocent lives lost, but she also firmly believed that these events were a part of the world's cosmic struggles as the forces of light fought the "*asuric*" (demonic) forces, a Manichean dualism common to Zoroastrianism, Hindu epics and modern guru discourses. Yvonne was convinced that through the turmoil, a new world would be born where everyone would have a higher spiritual consciousness and there would be no scope for violence and hatred. In these views, the individual and society are seen as being inextricably interlinked such that the "higher consciousness" on the part of all individuals would necessarily lead to a better society. Kiran, although not a practitioner of Integral Yoga, also held

²¹³ Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is the leader and founder of the Art of Living movement with centres in 151 countries. The Art of Living consists of teaching breathing and meditation techniques, and yoga postures, all of which are meant to lead to a better, healthier lifestyle by enabling practitioners to cope with mental and physical stress. Similar to other modern guru movements like Maharshi Mahesh Yogi's TM, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar also appeals to the traditional authority of the Vedas to legitimise its teachings. See Tollefsen (2011).

a futuristic perspective, whereby she believed that “all the answers” were not in India, “not even in ancient India”. She said:

We’re at the point where we need to take the best, the profundity of the Eastern traditions which for me is that deep realisation of interconnectedness and oneness because that is what’s at the base of spirituality like when you meditate, when you go really, really deep your own sense of individual boundedness dissolves. You realise you’re a part of this whole field of consciousness, you’re not separate, nothing is separate in this world. And that realisation would automatically translate itself into a different kind of world. I mean a different way of living in the world where if we are all one, we have to cooperate, we have to create systems where I recognize that you are me and I am you. I don’t want you to starve [laughs as if at the absurdity of the inequalities and hierarchies] because you’re born in the lower caste. And not just in the caste system but in all of the world. I mean the capitalistic system [...] the gap between the rich and the poor is getting wider and wider and wider because it’s based on the idea [...] capitalism is based on values of separation, individualism, competition, violence, ruthless – you do whatever you have to for yourself, forget about the consequences. So, we need to go back to that deep interconnection, that we’re all interconnected, we’re all one. And then we have to bring that into our economic system, our ecological system, our social systems, our systems of governance, so for me it’s not a question of going back to the old ways.

In these narratives which envision the world as interconnected, my interlocutors’ early existential experiences of isolation are somewhat mitigated through their current spiritual conviction of belonging to an interconnected world, a deterritorialised universal spiritual citizenship if you will. They believe that the world is necessarily interconnected – interconnections of people across the globe, and interconnections of humans and nature – although at present many people overlook these interconnections at their peril. Like Kiran, most of my other interlocutors too believed that Indian spiritual traditions offered ancient resources for a better personal and global future. Nostalgically charged future orientations, thus, interrupted otherwise common eulogies of tradition seen as unchanging. The ability and desire to be true to one’s self was seen as an ethical issue intimately linked to society and social concerns. “We can’t change the world”, they would often tell me, “we can only change ourselves”. Their vision of the future is that of an ethical and moral space-time in which Indian spirituality is certainly key, but at the same time the ancient past, although looked at nostalgically and with fondness, is meant to lead to a newer, better future. In these views, the present, although bleak, has the potential to realise a better future in which the modern “ethic of authenticity” finds its full fruition by reconnecting the individual to a divinised world of interconnected authentic selves.

Conclusion

Sally once told me a story about one of her Indian friends who wanted to go to Germany to study. His father rejected his plans, and dejected, the son decided to leave home and go to the forest to become a *sannyasi*. But alas! There was no peace to be found there, for Sally's poor friend had to constantly negotiate with poachers and rangers in the forest. The anecdote is instructive of the changes taking place in India. Taking the forest as a metaphor, we could surmise that just as scriptural injunctions of going to the forest to find peace and quiet is no longer realisable, similarly long-held ideas of India as the place for spiritual pursuits, and simplistic spiritual versus materialistic dichotomies, need to be re-examined in the face of rapid changes.

In this chapter, I have looked at how narratives of feeling at home in India jostle with the changing face of India's everyday life. The antimodernist nostalgia for the premodern past, when confronted with the in-your-face realities of life in the elsewhere, takes recourse to different strategies for making home among the unfamiliar, including discourses of *karmic* and inner connection. I have argued that to appear alive, the premodern past of India is created along lines of spatial and temporal distantiation from the West. Inhabiting this distant space-time, while a means of enchanting the self as meaningful, can nonetheless lead to disenchantments with the everyday life. Making and being at home in India, then, refers to complex negotiations between abstract spirituality located in a hyperreal nostalgic India and the realities of everyday life in the proximate present of India.

Yet, it is precisely this imaginary of the hyperreal India which animates hopeful visions of a united, harmonious future for the world. The anti-modern quest can be Orientalist and reificatory, but it can also offer a glimmer of hope in which the future is envisaged as a more ethical, more humane world in which essentialisms might become meaningless. However, can the future imagination of spiritual seekers looking back to imaginaries of the past move beyond essentialist readings of differences produced through East/West asymmetries? Can the present everyday realities of the politics of privilege ultimately lead to the egalitarianism of a utopian future? These agonistics lie at the heart of journeys to and lives in the elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

Concluding Thoughts

I began this thesis with two stories about encountering people's perceptions of India and Indian spirituality in Lima and Berlin. In my conclusion I want to recount another story, from closer home. Sometime in 2012, I was attending a school friend's wedding in Delhi, along with other mutual friends. All of us friends had grown up in Delhi, belonged to middle-class families, and many of my friends were employed in well-paying jobs as engineers or managers in private companies. I was preparing my PhD research proposal at the time, and conversation with my friends veered toward the content of my proposal. One of my friends remembered an anecdote from a few months ago. He said he had gone to a shopping mall in Delhi where he chanced upon some German tourists who asked my friend for advice on good restaurants and sight-seeing spots nearby. They also asked him what he would recommend as a must-see spiritual place, and my friend said, laughing, he did not know what to say and in a moment of confusion, blurted out, "Taj Mahal"! We all burst out laughing. One of the most popular touristic icons of India, the Taj Mahal, a mausoleum commissioned by the 17th century Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan for his wife, Mumtaz Mahal, is often cited as symbolic of enduring love and exemplary of immaculate craftsmanship of Mughal architecture²¹⁴. But I had hardly ever heard of it being characterised as spiritual.

Looking back, I find the confusion on the part of my friend at being asked to name a spiritual place in India highly interesting. My friend found himself at a loss and did not know what to say to the tourists. If the same thing had been asked of my interlocutors, they would have, in all likelihood, been able to offer many more places to the tourists: several ashrams, names of gurus, particular cities. Why this dissonance between the India of my interlocutors' narratives, and the India of my friend's bewilderment? The answer(s) to this question guide(s) much of this thesis. The India that many of my interlocutors imagined, continue to imagine, and struggle to inhabit, is a place that is far removed from the daily lives of many Indians. The liminal zone that many of them have carved for themselves is not the everyday India of the locals, whose religious and cultural practices many of my interlocutors reject as "superstitious" or too traditional. On the other hand, many urban, middle-class Indians with aspirations of building a successful career and participating in the "world culture" (Hannerz 1990) of consumerism, may find little to identify with in the imaginaries of India

²¹⁴ The official government website of the Taj is found here <http://www.tajmahal.gov.in/>; The Lonely Planet description of the Taj: <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/india/uttar-pradesh/agra/sights/architecture/taj-mahal>; The National Geographic describes it here http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/world-heritage/taj-mahal/#/taj-mahal-india-agra-reflection_93080_600x450.jpg

as an inherently spiritual place, especially where the discourse of spirituality posits it in opposition to materialism (the goals of career advancement and practices of conspicuous consumption)²¹⁵ as well as Westernisation and modernity. As I have argued in this thesis, the India of my interlocutors' imagination is a hyperreal place, albeit with a long creation-history which does have implications for real world politics. The quest, to find an alternative way of life in places imagined to be the last remaining outposts of pre-modern times, keeps alive the very inequalities and issues that it seeks to subvert, making the antimodern quest a distinctly modern undertaking.

Modernity, as Eisenstadt (2000) has argued, is not synonymous with Westernisation; nor are, "Western patterns of modernity" (ibid, 3), the only ways of being modern. Instead, there are multiple modernities, that is, different ways of being modern in different parts of the world, Western and non-Western. Eisenstadt's influential argument is compellingly in favour of understanding modernity as constantly being reinterpreted and remade in multiple nation-states, in multiple ways. However, where Eisenstadt takes nation-states as comprehensive units, the transnational movement of people with shared purposes and motivations make it important to extend Eisenstadt's theories to incorporate certain transnational discourses and practices as constituting multiple modernities. In my thesis, I have argued that the anti-modern ethics of my interlocutors envisages a different and yet thoroughly modern future in which the crisis of the self is seemingly fully resolved. Their anti-modernism spanning different spatial locations is modern in several ways: firstly, the supposedly lost past embodied by India is nevertheless a time-space (appearing to be) accessible in the here-and-now due to its historical creation via colonialism, Orientalism and Indian nationalism; secondly, this 'lost past' is available for romantic consumption even as capitalist consumption of commodities is decried; and thirdly, the alternative proposed is not a return to the glorious past, rather, it is a forward looking vision, following the model of biological evolutionism, in which the modern "ethic of authenticity" finds its full fruition by reconnecting the individual to a divinised world of interconnected authentic selves.

For my interlocutors, their rebellion from Western society arose from youthful disenchantment with established social conventions and norms. But the choice of certain tropes as the panacea to disenchantment is instructive of a much longer history. Individual narratives of spirituality and perceptions of India as an inherently spiritual place need to be contextualised within a wider

²¹⁵ Then again, several Indian gurus appeal to middle-class, urban, Indians because they talk about how to negotiate the modern world without becoming lost in its trappings, but without escaping from it (Warrier 2005).

historical framework of both Orientalism and Indian nationalist reappropriation of Orientalist tropes, pointing us to the importance of continuing to examine these projections onto India in order to understand the movement of people and ideas from the Global North to the South in contemporary times. These movements compel us to understand globalisation as a process that is not simply from “the West to the rest”, but as one comprising of multidirectional flows. Further, they direct us to the politics of privilege inherent in such movements, for why does one need to relocate to sites of relative economic disadvantage for a spiritual life?

As some of my interlocutors said to me, ultimately, the place ought not to matter to one’s spiritual pursuits. Kenneth and Luigi, as also some of my other interlocutors, said that, ideally, one should be able to practice spirituality anywhere and no one place was necessarily more spiritual than others. Yet, they and most of the expatriates I engaged with, do believe that India has a long history of spirituality which set it apart from other places, especially the West. As discussed previously, the discourse of spirituality rests on opposition to materialism, which also, for all practical purposes, enables the pursuit of a spiritual life by those from more affluent nations in places of material disadvantage. Consequently, places which are seen to be “lagging behind” the modern West in terms of technological-industrial development emerge as places imbued with spirituality. The modern construction of linear, teleological time endows, “the unchanging essence of the past [...] with a special aura of sanctity, purity, and authenticity [...] The tradition of modern writing on authenticity tends to locate it as the positive (both ethically and ontologically), if fleeting or evanescent, term in the opposition between the self and the market or modernity” (Duara 1998, 293-94). Duara goes on to write that his conception of authenticity, refers to an, “order or regime simulated by representations of authoritative inviolability. It derives this authority from being good for all times, which is tantamount to being beyond the reach of time” (Duara 1998, 294).

The India of my interlocutors’ narratives is a simulacrum of the mythical, eulogised past – of Vedic times and seers and sages – which retains its authenticity precisely by being located in a past so distant and sacred that it is indeed “good for all times”. Its authenticity is seen as being in contrast to the market-driven, capitalistic, modern West (as well as the rapidly globalising India) in the here-and-now. It is by stepping into this hyperreal time-space that many of my interlocutors tried to recreate their selves which were hitherto experienced as alienated, disenchanted and fragmented (unlike Duara, in my project the authentic self emerges as an ontological category). However, where does one locate this essential spirituality upon relocating to a place chosen precisely for its spatio-temporal distance? Not in the everyday life, but in the realm of abstract, extracted essence,

which when filtered through the neo-Orientalist lens, converts the beliefs and practices of religious others as “spiritual”, legitimising its extraction and appropriation in personal journeys of redefining oneself as spiritually “conscious”.

Versluis (2006) argues that antimodernists do have important things to say insofar as they point to the exploitiveness and destructiveness of modern progress, and the ensuing social divisions and hierarchies. However, where antimodernism can offer the vision of a united and interconnected world, as in the context of my study, it can also lead to insular elitism born from the conviction that people with similar spiritual views and “depth” are more conscious than others. As I have argued in Chapters 4 and 5, many of interlocutors did recreate their self-identity in terms of connectedness with people (gurus) and places (India) through notions of *karmic* connection and the idea of “returning” to India. Bender (2007) notes, “Determining or discussing a past life does not merely extend a person’s history back in time, it additionally adds another ‘layer’ of mystical history and connection to a person’s genealogical history” (600). But whereas the *karma* discourse does add a layer of mystical history and connectedness to some expatriates’ biographies, the same discourse diminishes the need to form relations of deep engagement with locals. In fact, the discourse of *karmic* connection can, and does, legitimise the lack of engagement with local people and their practices, since if the connection is *already* there, the need to forge connections through everyday practices with everyday people becomes irrelevant. Paradoxically, where local Tamils were seen as being too traditional, young urbanised men and women, me included at times, were often castigated for forgetting who we “really” are. While many expatriates see themselves as wilful agents who can change and “work on” their selves to constantly develop it spiritually, their views at the same time deny agency to Indians who, for them, almost always get it wrong – either by being too traditional or having become too modern. The creation and performance of their “spiritual subjectivity”, it seems, needs to fix the identity of Indians into singular reified categories of “too traditional” or “too modern” against which their own authenticity is then judged and implicitly deemed superior²¹⁶. Their “spiritual but not religious” discourse both fortifies and thrives on such hierarchical identitarian politics.

As discussed in the last chapter, their narratives are also forward-looking, looking toward and hoping for a meaningful future where their authentic selves would find full fruition. Even as some

²¹⁶ However, as pointed before, there were a few of my interlocutors who did engage with locals and rejected views that their religious beliefs and practices were not “really” spiritual.

of them were concerned about unsustainable development in India, coupled with exoticist and ethnocentric views about Indian's mimicry of the West, their narratives nonetheless envisaged an inherently better, spiritually evolved world in the future. As also discussed before, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's teachings are especially germane to such worldviews, although even many of those who are not Integral Yoga followers also had similar futuristic perspectives. Yet, in light of the preceding discussion, it remains to be asked, who is included in the utopian vision of a united world, dreamt of on Third World soil, aided by the economic and political imbalances which make permanent relocation possible from the West to the East? Will there be room in this future world for those people who find religious meaning in their deities and *pujas*, and for people with aspirations of owning material possessions? As long as Indians are expected to do the tightrope walk between not being too different ("superstitious", "too attached to families", "hierarchical" – values abhorred by many Westerners) and not being different enough ("materialistic", "modern" – values many Westerners want to leave behind), their inclusion in the utopian vision is far from guaranteed.

Having said that, the tropes of spiritual India and Indian spirituality are not solely Western creations. Indian religious leaders reappropriated these ideas in their anticolonial nationalist discourse and contemporary gurus have continued to employ notions of India's spiritual superiority to appeal to a wider international audience. Thus, when many of my interlocutors use these tropes in their narratives, it is not as if they are simply articulating a Western discourse. Rather, they are articulating a discourse initiated by the Europeans, reappropriated and modified by Indian religious leaders and gurus, and transmitted back and forth between the West and India. Consequently, it would seem they are participating in a highly universal discourse of spirituality with little or no association with Hinduism, except in its most inclusive, ecumenical sense of *sanatana dharma*. In fact, most expatriates I engaged with, did not believe that the teachings they followed (Sri Aurobindo's or other gurus') represent (neo) Hinduism. When I asked Julia if she thought that through Sri Aurobindo's writings, she was actually participating in Hinduism, she said that she had never really thought about it at all. Besides, she said, she does not think of Sri Aurobindo's teachings in terms of such "categories" which would diminish the universal applicability of his teachings. Julia was not wrong in saying that to see Integral Yoga teachings simply in terms of Hinduism is incorrect. As discussed, in Chapter 1, the Mother's occult training had influence on some of the tenets of Integral Yoga. However, there is a strong neo-Hindu focus, that is, emphasis on the Vedanta, in the teachings of most Indian gurus including Sri Aurobindo. What does the success of India's branding as the land of ancient spirituality, both by Indian gurus and by Indian

and Western seekers, entail for the nation-state of India and for Western spiritual practitioners in India?

In regard to that question, in Chapter 5, I briefly mentioned that the reification of India as inherently spiritual and spiritually superior to the world can have the unfortunate effect of feeding into Hindu nationalist discourses which also rely on such reified, singular notions for the formation of national identity and *Volksgeist*. I believe that my interlocutors do not support Hindu nationalist discourse and ideology which positions itself primarily against (the reified category of) Muslims²¹⁷. However, these general tropes have the potential to further bolster Hindu nationalism. Future research might address in detail the links between expatriate seekers' subscription to the idea of spiritual India and Hindu nationalism. But I want to indicate here, as part of my closing thoughts, the ramifications of the global success of the trope of spiritual India. As discussed in Chapter 1, the anticolonial spiritual discourse of gurus such as Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo combined universalisation of Hinduism with neo-Hindu spirituality as the bases of Indian national identity. Lise McKean (1996), in her seminal study of gurus and the Hindu nationalist movement, points out that such tropes continue to proliferate in India. In her meeting with Ashok Singhal in 1988, the then general secretary of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), a Hindu nationalist organisation involved in the infamous Babri Masjid (mosque) demolition²¹⁸, Singhal asserted, "Of all nations, India alone has spirituality" (xv); a sentiment that finds much currency among expatriate spiritual practitioners, albeit in the form of romantic appreciation. McKean (1996) argues, "As producers and purveyors of spiritual commodities, gurus assist in propagating Hindu nationalism, an ideology that relies on referents to Hindu India's unparalleled spiritual prowess and moral authority" (1)²¹⁹. As global consumers of such commodities, can Western seekers be seen as buying into and therefore fortifying such ideology? There is no easy answer to this, but pointing toward the complex deployment of similar tropes in the universalist discourse of spirituality and the nationalist discourse of India's spirit helps us to understand the politics in which expatriate spiritual practitioners are implicated.

Despite the focus on India's inherent spirituality and Vedantic teachings in both narratives of my interlocutors and the Hindu nationalist project, there are important points of departure. The Hindu

²¹⁷ See Sally's critique of attempts to monotheise Hinduism in Chapter 4.

²¹⁸ See van der Veer (1994) for a detailed study of the mosque's demolition, ensuing Hindu-Muslim riots, and the VHP's role in the event.

²¹⁹ See also Pandya (2016) for gurus and nationalism.

nationalist discourse is fiercely militant and hypermasculine in its attempt to recuperate what it views as an emasculated Hindu identity (Lucia 2014b, 20). In contrast, most of my interlocutors emphasise love and compassion as the bases of their spiritual beliefs. Hindu nationalism promotes the ideology of Hindu spiritual superiority in order to gain political dominance (Annavarapu 2015; Chatterjee 2010; McKean 1996). Most of my expatriate interlocutors actively disengage themselves from issues of national and international politics (although as I argue, such distancing is made possible due to political asymmetries in the world), whereby spirituality, in their view, should be shorn of all political leanings and commitments. Yet, such a stance lends itself, not to political radicalism, but to political conservatism, keeping alive the very status quo that it seeks to transgress (Versluis 2006).

It is this conundrum of antimodernism which I see manifested in the controversy around Peter Heehs' biography of Sri Aurobindo (see Chapter 1). On the one hand, several followers of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, Indian or otherwise, in support of the book's contents or not, opposed the lawsuit filed against Heehs, because in their views, ecumenical spirituality has a place for everyone and every view. On the other hand, some of the (Indian) plaintiffs claimed that Heehs' biography had hurt the religious sentiments of Indians (Heehs 2015). In blog posts dedicated to denouncing Heehs, some followers of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother claim that Heehs wrote the book with the deliberate intent of distorting Sri Aurobindo's views, in order to present it to Western audiences which is incapable and/or unwilling to appreciate the depth of his teachings. One follower writes that Peter Heehs' biography is symptomatic of the wider issue of Western thinkers misinterpreting Sri Aurobindo's thought, "modern Western thinkers are taking his (Sri Aurobindo's) ideas, presenting them as their own with subtle twists, and then deprecating Sri Aurobindo for being too 'religious', 'devotional', 'out of date', 'irrelevant', 'Hindu fundamentalist', etc., precisely the criticisms that PH [Peter Heehs] promotes with detailed documentation in his biography"²²⁰. In such views, (at least some) Westerners are seen as incapable of truly being able to appreciate Indian spirituality.

²²⁰ See "*Sraddhalu Ranade Writes to Manoj Das*" on the blog dedicated to Sri Aurobindo's life and works <http://savitri.in/library/resources/lives-of-sri-aurobindo/aug-07-2010>. Also see other views expressed against Heehs <http://hindureview.com/2014/09/15/response-intellectual-aggression-peter-heehs/>; and views expressed on the blog: <https://livesofaurobindo.wordpress.com/>

During the course of fieldwork, I could not discern if such disparaging views extended to all Westerners or not. But where the global discourse of spiritual India rests on a hegemonic, reified conception of India, it is not surprising that the same discourse is a part of cultural nationalism which, while asserting its own place in the global world, leaves little room for non-Hindu, non-Indians to claim allegiance to (neo-Hindu) Indian spirituality. For the realisation of an ecumenical spiritual world in this world, the various political ramifications of imagining India as a spiritual place need to be examined by both scholars and spiritual practitioners themselves. Through tracing the life journeys of Western spiritual seekers to India, this thesis has shown the politics immanent in the dialectic of fixity (of the idea of spiritual India) and fluidity (of identities and physical movement), parochialism (in terms of spiritual elitism on the part of expatriates and nationalism on the part of Hindu nationalist) and universalism (the ecumenism of guru teachings), all of which are simultaneously a part of the global imaginaries of India as a spiritual place.

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